Twenty-One Reasons to Care About the Psychological Basis of Ownership

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Abstract

The psychological basis of ownership is a neglected area of research; the authors consider twenty-one disparate reasons why it is worth investigating.
There is nothing which so generally strikes the imagination, and engages the affections of mankind, as the right of property; or that sole and despotic dominion which one man claims and exercises over the external things of the world, in total exclusion of the right of any other individual in the universe. And yet there are very few, that will give themselves the trouble to consider the origin and foundation of that right.


With these words, William Blackstone drew attention to the relative neglect of ownership in the scholarship of his times and began his own treatise on property. Since then philosophers, historians, legal scholars, biologists, and social scientists have taken up the call to analyze property rights. Within psychology, most aspects of ownership have received scant attention or have been overlooked completely. In this chapter, we outline twenty-one reasons why it will be important (and interesting) to understand the psychological basis of ownership of property, including its developmental origins.

1. Daily life. Ownership is involved in many common activities, including selling and buying, lending and borrowing, giving and receiving gifts, donating and begging for charity. Knowledge about ownership allows children to take part in these activities and to understand their structure and implications.

2. A human universal, and cultural and cross-species variation. Ownership is a human universal; property rights have been found in all human cultures (Brown, 1991). Ownership may also have existed in the prehistoric world, as can be inferred from the existence of trade routes. Hence, understanding the psychological basis of ownership may be informative about all people. At the same time, ownership may vary considerably across cultures, and so ownership provides a window for understanding cultural variation. Likewise, many animal species show possessive, ownership-like behaviors. Brosnan (this volume) reviews the evidence for and limitations of ownership behavior across animal species (also see, Stake, 2004). So ownership also provides a domain for making interspecies comparisons.

3. Myriad inferences. Ownership is multifaceted. In reasoning about ownership, people draw many sorts of inferences, including inferences about who can be an owner; inferences about what sorts of things can be owned; inferences about which privileges are conferred by ownership; inferences about how ownership is established, transferred, and relinquished; inferences about whether a particular object is owned; and inferences about who the owner is (Blake & Harris, this volume; Friedman, Neary, Defeyter & Malcolm, this volume; Kalish & Anderson, this volume; Noles & Keil, this volume). Presumably diverse rules and processes
underlie these varied inferences. The nature of these rules and processes, and their development in children, is almost entirely unknown.

4. **An abstract concept.** Much work in cognitive development has investigated children’s possession of abstract concepts, including mental state concepts, numerical concepts, and moral concepts. Abstract concepts do not correspond with things perceivable by the senses, and so it is mysterious how children come to acquire them. Ownership is also clearly abstract (Jackendoff, 1992). In looking at some object, it cannot be directly perceived whether it belongs to one person rather than another (or no one at all). It is also impossible to perceive the privileges that ownership confers. Hence, ownership provides another domain for studying how it is that people possess and use abstract concepts.

5. **Object cognition.** Most owned things are objects, and today most objects around us are owned. Reasoning about ownership, then, can be viewed as a form of object-cognition, much like considering an object’s physical properties, category membership, or function. In fact, Blake and Harris (this volume) suggest that ownership is represented as an attribute of objects, and a means by which similar objects can be distinguished—for instance one might contrast two books by saying that one belongs to Anne while the other belongs to her friend Bob. By understanding ownership we better understand an important determinant of how children and adults alike relate to objects.

6. **Beyond objects.** Beyond inanimate physical objects, many other entities can be viewed as owned, including one’s own body, land, animals, and various sorts of intellectual property (Noles & Keil, this volume; Olson & Shaw, in press; Rochat, this volume). Noles and Keil suggest that children and adults have similar intuitions about which sorts of things can be owned. Ownership reasoning may also be applied to things that are not explicitly viewed as owned. For instance, people might view their mates as property (Wilson & Daly, 1992), and perhaps the parent–child relationship also has elements of ownership. Jealousy may result from applying ownership principles to others. Even when ownership is not explicitly acknowledged, it may influence people’s behavior and reasoning in many domains.

7. **Behaving in relation to things.** People typically consider ownership when planning behavior in relation to things. Anne can underline words in her book; she will be less likely to do this in a book borrowed from her friend Bob. As Friedman et al. (this volume) stress, before interacting with an object it is important to consider whether it is owned or not and, if it is owned, by whom. To show mature behavior in relation to objects, children must come to make such inferences about ownership.

8. **Social behavior.** Ownership also influences how people relate to one another. Suppose Carl takes Anne’s book and (without permission) starts writing in it. Those who know that Anne is the owner (including Anne herself) will probably protest, and may try to prevent Carl from
writing any more. Moreover, they will view Carl negatively for interfering with Anne’s property. Ownership priorities help people avoid and resolve many social conflicts.

9. **Understanding behavior.** Reasoning about ownership is crucial for understanding and predicting behavior (Snare, 1972). Doug, a stranger to Anne, will not take Anne’s book, even when she leaves it and goes to order a coffee. Understanding Doug’s behavior (or lack of it) requires reasoning about ownership: Anne owns the book, so Doug should not take it. Reasoning about ownership likewise allows Doug’s behavior to be predicted in advance. Reasoning about ownership is a form of social cognition.

10. **Rights and transgressions.** One reason that ownership impacts behavior is that ownership confers specific rights and privileges with respect to property. Anne’s ownership of the book implies that other people are excluded from it—they *ought* not to use it (without her permission). Ross, Conant, and Vickar (this volume) provide evidence that quite young children adhere to this “right of exclusion” (see also Ross, 1996). People who violate this right are viewed as taking morally wrong, often illegal actions. These actions include theft, trespassing, and vandalism—moral transgression specific to ownership.

11. **Responsibilities of owners.** Ownership may also have further moral consequences because owners are responsible for their property. Ownership rights are constrained by other moral obligations. Although owners are typically permitted to use their property, they cannot use it to harm others. More than this, negligent owners are sometimes culpable when their property is involved in harm.

12. **Social relationships.** Ownership is moderated by social relationships. For instance, although Anne’s ownership of the book strictly means that non-owners are excluded from using it (without her permission), this limitation may apply more strongly to strangers than it does to Anne’s friends or to her family members. It would be socially awkward for Anne to deny ordinary access to a friend, and doing so might affect the nature of their relationship. Fiske’s (1992) theory of social relations outlines how social obligations (often involving ownership, though not limited to it) vary across four types of social relations. Young children may not share their parents’ appreciation that social obligations can temper ownership (e.g., Ross et al., this volume).

13. **Distributive justice and moral development.** Ownership confers power upon owners in relation to others. Anne may either permit or deny others’ access to her book. In controlling access, she may learn to consider others’ needs and welfare. She may share or donate her property to others in need, or trade property based on principles of equity (Rochat, this volume). Thus ownership and property provide a rich domain for studying the development of certain moral principles.

14. **Socialization.** To the extent that ownership governs interactions with objects as well as rights and obligations with respect to objects,
children must come to understand and adhere to the relevant principles of entitlement. Ownership provides a specific domain in which parents’ socialization can be studied (Ross et al., this volume). Moreover, socializing influences may be bi-directional, as children negotiate and influence the principles adopted in their families. Studies of ownership may help specify the scope and limits of children’s influences on the socializing process.

15. Social recognition. Ownership of an object is meaningful to the extent that it is recognized and respected by others. In this sense, ownership is mind-dependent; Kalish and Anderson (this volume) consider two senses, one mild, one stronger, in which ownership can be viewed this way. Because ownership of an object can only be respected to the extent that people know the object is owned, owners must communicate their ownership status to effectively protect their rights. For this reason, owners must infer or ascertain whether others know that certain property belongs to them, and take action to make their ownership apparent (Rose, 1985).

16. Conflicts. Ownership is at the root of many property disputes. It is a common source of conflicts in young children (e.g., Ross, 1996), and an enduring cause of conflict among individual adults, groups, and nations. It could be that ownership disputes simply result from misunderstandings and self-interest. Alternatively, disputes might arise because of properties specific to the cognitive systems underlying reasoning about ownership. If so, ownership disputes may provide valuable hints about how people reason about ownership. Conversely, knowledge concerning ownership may improve understanding of ownership disputes, perhaps including how they can better be avoided and resolved.

17. First- versus third-person perspectives. People prefer things that they own over those they do not. Such preferences arise in judgments of how favorable objects are (mere ownership effect; Beggan, 1992), judgments of how much objects are worth (endowment effect; e.g., Kahneman, Knetsch, & Thaler, 1990), and tests of object memorability (Cunningham, Turk, Macdonald, & Macrae, 2008), and these preferences may also extend to other species (Brosnan, this volume). Such preferences may sometimes be irrational—why should merely owning an object make it seem more valuable? But often greater attentiveness to one’s property seems like a natural consequence of ownership. As Wilson and Sperber (2004, p. 610) note, in a very different context, “while we are all likely to notice the sound of glass breaking in our vicinity, we are likely to attend to it more, and process it more deeply, when our memory and inference mechanisms identify it as the sound of our glass breaking.”

18. The self and self-image. It has long been claimed that ownership is linked to the self and self-image (e.g., James, 1890). For instance, Belk (1991) argues that many owned things are regarded as extensions of the self, and hence treated as having special properties. Similar views
underlie certain accounts of the development of ownership in children; Rochat (this volume; 2010) views children's sense of ownership over objects as arising from infants extending their sense of self (including responsibility for their own actions) to objects (also see Humphrey, 1992, Chapter 18).

19. Psychology and law. An entire branch of law, property law, is concerned with ownership. Ownership is not just important in modern legal systems, but has always been a concern of the law, as evidenced by the preoccupation with ownership in early legal codes, such as the Laws of Manu (1500 BC). Understanding ownership may be informative about the psychological basis of law, the effects of law on psychology, and the degree to which psychological intuitions are consistent with law.

20. Mental illness and crime. Unusual ownership-related behaviors characterize certain mental health conditions, such as compulsive hoarding (Steketee & Frost, 2003; Preston, Muroff, & Wengrovitz, 2009) and kleptomania; the same is true for criminal activities, such as shoplifting, robbery, and vandalism. Increasing our understanding of ownership may influence how we view these varied phenomena. Perhaps some of these occur because of peculiarities in how certain people reason about ownership.

21. A meeting of domains. At the heart of reasoning about ownership seems to be the concept owns, which is arguably primitive (Jackendoff, 1992). At the same time, reasoning about ownership plausibly draws on, or connects with, many other diverse types of reasoning. As noted earlier, reasoning about ownership may be tied to moral reasoning, to social obligations, and to the self and self-concept. Certain ownership inferences may also depend on associative learning (Blake & Harris, this volume), counterfactual or causal reasoning (Friedman, 2010), assessments of creativity (Kanngiesser, Gjersoe, & Hood, 2010), and on people's ability to draw the distinction between natural kinds and artifacts (Friedman et al., this volume). It will be an interesting challenge to explain how these diverse forms of reasoning join together to make people's reasoning about ownership possible.

References


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