

2011-2012 PSYCHOLOGY COLLOQUIUM SERIES

Principles guiding young children's reasoning about ownership

Date: November 18th, 2011

Location: Somerville House, Room 3345

Time: 3:00 pm - 4:00 pm



Dr. Ori Friedman

Department of Psychology
University of Waterloo

ABSTRACT:

Ownership of property is involved in countless daily activities, and is a major influence on behaviour and thought. It constrains behaviour in relation to objects—the owner of a book is permitted to read it or write in it, while non-owners are not. It affects social behaviour and moral judgments—a person who steals the book may be punished and scorned, and is unlikely to be trusted. And it influences the extent to which objects are valued—the owner of the book is likely to believe it is worth more money than will non-owners. Although ownership is pervasive, its nature and origins are mysterious. Is ownership a cultural creation? Or does it have a natural basis? These questions can be informed by developmental psychology. If ownership is a product of culture, then young children should have little appreciation of ownership, or at best a piecemeal conception of it. In this talk, I report findings favouring the opposite conclusion that ownership may have a natural basis. Reviewing three lines of developmental research, I suggest that young children's reasoning about ownership is guided by broad abstract principles, such as the principle that objects become owned through labour and investment.

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