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Brief Report

Preschoolers' resource allocations align with their normative judgments

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ABSTRACT

Recent research showed that preschool children hold normative views on how to distribute resources fairly and enforce these fairness norms even from third parties. The current study examined whether 3- to 6-year-old preschool children's resource allocation behavior aligns with their normative stances. To this end, children were presented with protagonists who either distributed resources equally between a poor recipient and a rich recipient or gave more to the poor recipient. In addition, children's own resource distribution behavior toward a rich and poor other was assessed. Results showed that the more children protested against the protagonist distributing resources equally, and the more they affirmed the protagonist giving more to the poor, the more resources they themselves allocated to a poor other. These findings point to a relation between moral evaluation and behavior during the preschool years.

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Introduction

Developmental psychology has recently experienced an increased interest in the early development of normativity. In particular, preschool children have been shown to reason about the universality of different types of social norms (Killen & Dahl, 2018), enforce social norms from unrelated third parties (Rakoczy & Schmidt, 2013), and even punish agents who violate social norms (Kenward & Öst, 2015). They do this not only toward agents who act antisocially but also toward agents who do not

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distribute resources fairly (Rakoczy, Kaufmann, & Lohse, 2016; Wörle & Paulus, 2018). Thus, preschool children demonstrate a normative view of the fairness principles underlying resource allocation and sharing decisions, and they enforce them toward third parties.

However, the behavioral significance of children's and adults' normative views is the subject of a heated theoretical debate (i.e., the moral judgment–moral action gap). In other words, do young children's normative views on how to share actually translate into their own behavior? On the one hand, some scholars have pointed to a gap between moral judgment and moral action (e.g., Bandura, 1999; Blasi, 1983) and have emphasized hypocrisy and inconsistency in humans' moral life (e.g., Batson, Thompson, & Chen, 2002). In line with this view, a number of studies reported disparities between judgments and actions in the moral domain (cf. Monin & Merritt, 2012).

On the other hand, theoretical views suggest that moral judgments are behaviorally relevant (for a review, see Dahl & Killen, 2018) and that the previously reported disparities could be due to the application of different domains of moral judgment (Turiel, 2003). Indeed, recent studies demonstrate that moral reasoning about fair resource allocation and actual resource allocation decisions show similar age-related trends on a group level (Elenbaas & Killen, 2016; Elenbaas, Rizzo, Cooley, & Killen, 2016; Rizzo & Killen, 2016; Schmidt, Svetlova, Johe, & Tomasello, 2016). Moreover, Abramson, Daniel, and Knafo-Noam (2018) showed that 5- to 12-year-old children's value orientations are related to their sharing behavior.

Yet, the situation is less clear concerning younger children and concerning the level of the individual. Smith, Blake, and Harris (2013) reported that only in 7- and 8-year-olds, but not in 3- to 6-year-olds, was the normative evaluation of how one should share—on a group level—in line with the actual sharing behavior. Likewise, Rizzo and Killen (2016) reported that 3- and 4-year-olds consider equity issues (i.e., preexisting differences in resource endowment) in their reasoning about fair allocations while rather allocating resources equally when engaging in a resource distribution. This could suggest that reasoning and behavior might become coordinated only after the preschool years but might be dissociated early in development. In other words, from a developmental point of view, it is possible that different domains of psychological functioning (here verbally based normative judgments and behavior) are initially less integrated and become integrated only later in development following the orthogenetic principle of human development (Werner, 1957). Yet, previous studies with preschool children remained on a group-level analysis, that is, examined age-related trends in normative reasoning and behavior separately (e.g., Rizzo & Killen, 2016; Schmidt et al., 2016) without examining interrelations between judgment and action. Consequently, they leave open the question of whether or not there is indeed a relation on the level of the individual.

This debate is particularly relevant because recent research has provided novel evidence for preschool children's strong appeal to social norms. It has been shown that already early during the preschool years children actively enforce social norms from unrelated third parties (e.g., Paulus, 2017; Rakoczy, Warneken, & Tomasello, 2008), negatively evaluate unfair allocations (e.g., Elenbaas et al., 2016; Li, Rizzo, Burkholder, & Killen, 2017), and demand fair resource allocations (Rakoczy et al., 2016; Wörle & Paulus, 2018). These findings have been suggested to indicate the presence of agent-neutral norms that are likewise applied to self and other (Rakoczy & Schmidt, 2013). Yet, these studies have left open the question of whether or not children's normative evaluations of others indeed translate into own behavior.

In other words, to infer the presence of norms that are agent neutral, one would need to show that preschool children also apply these norms to themselves and align their own behavior with their moral stances. Yet, as indicated above, the empirical findings are rather controversial. One issue that could mask potential relations between judgment and behavior pertains to young children's poor self-regulation abilities (Eisenberg, 2000). It is possible that preschool children's behavior aligns with their moral evaluations in contexts that do not tax their limited self-control capacities (although the perception of others' need can sometimes also override selfish incentives; Engelmann, Herrmann, Rapp, & Tomasello, 2016). Notably, some of the studies with older children that reported a convergence between children's moral judgment and behavior relied on tasks in which children were asked to distribute resources between different recipients rather than sharing own goods (e.g., Elenbaas et al., 2016).

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