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Does children's moral compass waver under social pressure? Using the conformity paradigm to test preschoolers' moral and social-conventional judgments



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ABSTRACT

The current study tested whether preschoolers' moral and social-conventional judgments change under social pressure using Asch's conformity paradigm. A sample of 132 preschoolers ($M_{\text{age}} = 3.83$ years, $SD = 0.85$) rated the acceptability of moral and social-conventional events and also completed a visual judgment task (i.e., comparing line length) both independently and after having viewed two peers who consistently made immoral, unconventional, or visually inaccurate judgments. Results showed evidence of conformity on all three tasks, but conformity was stronger on the social-conventional task than on the moral and visual tasks. Older children were less susceptible to pressure for social conformity for the moral and visual tasks but not for the conventional task.

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Introduction

A large body of research guided by social domain theory (Smetana, 2006; Smetana, Jambon, & Ball, 2014; Turiel, 1983, 1998, 2006) has shown that children understand distinctions between moral issues

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(related to others' welfare, fairness, and rights) and social conventions (shared social norms in various social contexts). For example, by age 4, children consistently view moral transgressions as wrong, whereas social-conventional transgressions are interpreted as wrong only if rules or authority figures say so (Smetana & Braeges, 1990; Smetana et al., 2012). According to this theoretical framework, moral judgments are prescriptive and pertain to how people ought to relate to each other; they are not relative to or defined by the social context (Turiel, 1983). Although evidence of children's early understanding of moral prescriptions is robust, much less is known about whether children hold on to the prescriptive view when making judgments about moral and social-conventional issues in situations involving social pressure.

Children's judgments about different types of normative behavior may be more or less resistant to group pressure. If moral judgments are prescriptive and unalterable (Smetana, 2006; Smetana et al., 2012; Turiel, 1983, 2002, 2006), a judgment about hitting a classmate may be less easily influenced by group consensus than a judgment about a social norm such as not putting a toy back in its designated place. Past studies have not experimentally examined whether children's prescriptions of moral and social-conventional issues can be distinguished by the degree to which they are influenced by peer group judgment. In other words, it is not known whether children change their judgments when faced with social pressure to conform to atypical judgments about moral and social norms and whether change in judgments varies by domain and age. Addressing these questions will expand our understanding of young children's rule alterability and how peers influence normative judgments in young children.

Asch's (1956) classic conformity paradigm provides one way of testing the prescriptiveness of morality. This paradigm has been modified recently for research with young children. For example, using a modified Asch line length task with preschool children, Corriveau and Harris (2010) found that children as young as 3 and 4 years were susceptible to social pressure by adult confederates when making simple line length judgments. Consistent with this finding, 3- and 4-year-olds also showed higher conformist tendencies when making line length judgments in public settings than when their responses were unobserved (Corriveau, Kim, Song, & Harris, 2013). Similarly, preschoolers have demonstrated susceptibility to peer group consensus in animal size visual judgment based on pictures, indicating that peers also serve as a key social reference group as early as 4 years (Haun & Tomasello, 2011).

Young children have also been found to demonstrate conformity in the domain of conventional information and action. For example, when unfamiliar images are labeled in a way that conflicts with children's prior knowledge of conventional names or information, 3- and 4-year-olds tend to accept claims made by others (Bernard, Harris, Terrier, & Clément, 2015; Jaswal, 2004). Similarly, when categorizing objects by their labels, children also tend to conform (Bernard, Proust, & Clément, 2015; Corriveau et al., 2009; Fusaro & Harris, 2008). In terms of object function, Haun, Rekers, and Tomasello (2012) found that even 2-year-olds preferred to follow a group majority's (three individuals) action to open a box rather than a single informant's action (repeated three times), suggesting that young children are more likely to follow majority behavior. More recently, Seston and Kelemen (2014) also found that 3-year olds conformed to group consensus when endorsing statements about novel objects' functions. Moreover, 3- to 5-year-olds' preferences for copying an inefficient action of either a single model or a group were shown to differ by culture, with Chinese Americans showing stronger preferences to imitate the group than Caucasian Americans (DiYanni, Corriveau, Kurkul, Nasrini, & Nini, 2015).

In sum, various studies have demonstrated that children show socially motivated agreement with the unanimous majority against their own initial judgment. This phenomenon has been labeled as "strong conformity" by Haun and Tomasello (2011). So far, little research has used a modified Asch conformity paradigm to examine the effects of social pressure on moral and social-conventional judgments. We know of only two related studies, both with adult participants. Kundu and Cummins (2013) asked two groups of participants to verbally rate the permissibility of 12 moral dilemmas on a 7-point scale. The dilemmas included two categories: typically "permissible" judgments (e.g., pushing a switch of a trolley to cause the death of one person vs. five people) and typically "impermissible" judgments (e.g., killing one's oldest son to appease the leader of a clan on whose land one trespassed) (Greene, Morelli, Lowenberg, Nystrom, & Cohen, 2008). The control group ($n = 17$) rated the dilemmas

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