



Young children think you can opt out of social-conventional but not moral practices



Marina Josephs*, Hannes Rakoczy

Institute of Psychology, University of Göttingen, Waldweg 26, D-37073 Göttingen, Germany

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ABSTRACT

Social-conventional but not moral norms bring with them the possibility of “opting-out” of the practice in question. The current study investigated preschoolers’ understanding of this special form of context-relativity: the norms’ validity upon the agent’s intention to engage in the respective activity. Forty-eight 3-year-olds saw a (puppet) agent act in accordance with or against a conventional or moral rule after announcing either to be part or to opt out of the activity. Children’s normative responses indicated a sophisticated understanding of the possibility to opt out of the norm-regulated activity. When confronted with a moral situation, children judged a norm-violating behavior independently of the agent’s announcement to be or not be part of the activity. In the social-conventional context, however, children judged the agent’s actions against the standards of her intention, protesting a norm violation less after the announcement to opt out of the activity.

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1. Introduction

Social norms form an indispensable part of our everyday life, regulating our interpersonal interactions and laying the foundations for our societal practices and institutions. Within the class of social norms, the most common distinction drawn in psychology and philosophy is between moral and social-conventional norms (e.g., [Turiel, 1983](#)). According to Social Domain Theory, moral norms are rules concerning issues such as personal welfare, justice and harm, while social-conventional norms are arbitrary rules about the correct or appropriate behavior in a given situation or social practice ([Smetana, 2006](#)).¹

In a long-standing tradition, numerous studies have shown that already young children distinguish moral and conventional norms on different dimensions (e.g., [Smetana, 1983, 1984](#); [Smetana et al., 2012](#)). From three years of age, they judge moral norm transgressions as more severe ([Smetana, 1981](#)) and less dependent on rules or authorities ([Smetana & Braeges, 1990](#)). Another crucial difference between the two kinds of norms is their degree of context-relativity: while moral norms are generally seen as universal, social-conventional norms are considered to be sensitive to situational circumstances. This kind of context-relativity comes in different forms. The one mostly studied so far concerns spatial contexts: an action (e.g., wearing your pajamas) may constitute a social-conventional mistake in one location (e.g., in school) but may be perfectly

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: marina.josephs@psych.uni-goettingen.de (M. Josephs).

¹ Note that, however, there is a big theoretical debate on whether this distinction is really best represented by different domains as proposed by Social Domain Theory ([Turiel, 1983](#)) or whether the psychological distinction is better drawn by norms with and without feelings as suggested by sentimentalist accounts ([Kelly, Stich, Haley, Eng, & Fessler, 2007](#); [Nichols, 2002](#)).

appropriate in a different location (e.g., at home). Recent research has shown that already 3-year-olds demonstrate a sensitivity to such spatial context-relativity of conventional norms (Rakoczy, Brosche, Warneken, & Tomasello, 2009; Smetana et al., 2012; Wyman, Rakoczy, & Tomasello, 2009). Context-relativity can also be defined as a function of culture, with prototypical moral transgressions being considered universally wrong in all cultures while conventions might be seen to vary between cultures. Recent research has shown that, again, already 3-year-olds are sensitive to this dimension (Schmidt, Rakoczy, & Tomasello, 2012).

One question, that has not been addressed so far, is whether young children also understand more complex forms of context-relativity. In particular, whether a given social norm holds can vary relative to the agent's intentions (to be or not be part of an activity or practice governed by this norm). We know from a growing body of evidence that preschoolers are sensitive to the perceived intentionality of the actor when asked to evaluate moral transgressions. They distinguish between accidental and intentional actions such that accidental mistakes are generally judged as less bad and deserving of less punishment (e.g., Baird & Astington, 2004; Killen, Lynn Mulvey, Richardson, Jampol, & Woodward, 2011; Yuill & Perner, 1988). Even more, they weigh mental state information differently depending on the kind of norm (moral vs. conventional) that was violated. When confronted with a physically constrained agent, children stopped criticizing and protesting the agent for an unintended moral mistake but still criticized the equivalent conventional one (Josephs, Kushnir, Gräfenhain, & Rakoczy, 2016). However, the kind of intentionality that is important when it comes to context-relativity, namely the contingency of the validity of different types of norms on the agent's intentionality, is of a different structure and complexity: do children understand that an agent's being subject to a given norm may be a function of her intention to participate in the given activity?

From a theoretical point of view, due to their relation with welfare and harm moral norms should be seen as unconditionally binding (constituting categorical imperatives, as philosophers have called them (Foot, 1972; Kant, 1785/1965): action prescriptions that hold irrespective of the agent's motivational set). Social-conventional norms, in contrast, due to their arbitrariness, should be seen as context-relative in the sense of being valid under the condition that the agent intends to be part of the practice in question. Social-conventional norms should thus offer the option of opting out under the right circumstances. No such option, in contrast, should be present in the case of moral norms. In fact, the intention to opt out of a moral practice is criticizable itself. Imagine someone announcing that she does not want to respect any other person's welfare, rights of well-being today, but rather prefers to harm others. First, this announcement itself gives sufficient reason for intervention. Second, if the person then actually fulfills her immoral intentions and harms somebody, her behavior is judged against the standards not of her intention "to harm others", but against moral standards and is thus seen as wrong, independently of the agent's prior announcement. When it comes to social-conventional norms, however, the validity of the norm depends on the person's commitment to be part of the norm. For the agent, this opens up the option of "opting out" of the normative scope of this very kind of activity. Imagine someone doing a Sudoku but then announcing she does not want to play Sudoku anymore, but would rather just paint the boxes in different colors. First of all, this announcement is not criticizable per se. Second, the subsequent action is now judged against the standard of the previous announcement and not against the standard of the norm of Sudoku. The very same action (painting the boxes in different colors) is thus less criticizable after the announcement to not play Sudoku than in a situation where the person announced to play Sudoku. In the latter situation the appropriate response would be to tell the agent "No, that's not how Sudoku goes. In Sudoku you have to write the correct numbers in the boxes", whereas in the former situation such a statement would be oddly misplaced.

Moral and social-conventional norms thus also differ in the possibility of opting out of the respective activity and context. While it is to some extent up to the agent to take part in social-conventional activities and thus either subject herself to the norms in questions or to opt out of the activities, it is not up to the agent in comparable ways whether she is subject to a moral norm. Empirical evidence from children concerning the evaluation of actions based on preceding commitments (to be part of a norm-governed activity or practice) is still rare. One study has investigated whether 6- to 10-year-olds' evaluation of a person "eating meat" differed as a function of the person's (reasons for the) commitment to be a vegetarian (Hussar & Harris, 2009). Results indicated that only if the person was a morally committed vegetarian, children blamed her for meat eating; however, meat eating was judged as "okay" if the person had no previous commitment to vegetarianism (or a merely non-moral commitment). Consequently, the person's choice for the very same action (eating meat) was judged against different standards as a function of the person's background commitments. This study thus presents first evidence for children's appreciation of the differential validity of moral norms relative to the agent's intention to engage in the respective activity. What it leaves open, though, is the question whether children consider such contingency of norm validity upon the agent's commitment to hold differentially in the cases of moral versus social-conventional norms. Furthermore, the children tested in this study, due to the complexity of the norms' contents (forms of vegetarianism) were rather old. When addressing the basic question what children understand about potential differences in the logical structures of different types of norms, it would be desirable to investigate children at the earliest ages at which a basic differentiation of types of norms has been documented (i.e. around age 3).

The rationale of the current study was thus the following: we investigated whether young children understand that moral and social-conventional norms differ in the degree to which they are context-relative vis-à-vis the agent's intention to be subject to the norm, and understand that social-conventional, but not moral norms, bring with them the possibility to "opt out" of the norm related activities. This study goes beyond existing research in several ways.

First, we systematically investigate paradigmatic examples of moral and social-conventional contexts to test whether children understand the structural differences between the two kinds of norms. Second, instead of giving children

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