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Modeling social norms increasingly influences costly sharing in middle childhood

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ABSTRACT

Prosocial and normative behavior emerges in early childhood, but substantial changes in prosocial behavior in middle childhood may be due to it becoming integrated with children's understanding of what is normative. Here we show that information about what is normative begins influencing children's costly sharing in middle childhood in a sample of 6- to 11-year-old German children. Information about what is normative was most influential when indicating what was "right" (i.e., "The right thing is to choose this"). It was less influential when indicating what was prescribed by a rule (i.e., "There is a rule that says to choose this") or when it indicated what the majority of people do (i.e., "Most people choose this"). These findings support the idea that middle childhood is when social norms begin to shape children's costly sharing and provide insight into the psychological foundations of the relationship between norms and prosocial behavior.

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Introduction

Costly prosocial behavior is widespread across human societies and is central to their success (Henrich, 2004). The tendency to act in ways that benefit others emerges in early childhood (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006; Hamlin, 2013; Kuhlmeier, Dunfield, & O'Neill, 2014; McAuliffe, Blake, Steinbeis, & Warneken, 2017; Silk & House, 2012; Warneken & Tomasello, 2009), but prosocial

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behavior also changes dramatically between infancy and adulthood (Hay & Cook, 2007; House et al., 2013). One of the most important developmental influences on prosocial behavior and its underlying psychology are likely to be socialization practices and acquired cultural beliefs (Chudek & Henrich, 2011; House, 2017; Köster, Schuhmacher, & Kärtner, 2015), particularly cultural beliefs in the form of learned social norms, which are behavioral standards shared and enforced by a community (Chudek & Henrich, 2011). Adults frequently base their costly sharing on culturally learned and society-specific social norms (e.g., deciding on the right amount to tip in a restaurant or to pay in taxes), and norms are important to many models of human prosociality and social psychological development (Bicchieri, 2016; Keller, 2013; Richerson & Boyd, 2005; Rutland, Killen, & Abrams, 2010; Tomasello & Vaish, 2013). Yet, we know little about how children come to model their own prosocial behavior on information about what is normative, an issue with large implications for our understanding of the psychology behind prosociality.

Developmental psychologists have clearly documented prosocial behavior in the form of instrumental and emotional helping in early childhood (Callaghan et al., 2011; Dunfield & Kuhlmeier, 2013; Svetlova, Nichols, & Brownell, 2010), but in cases where being prosocial comes at a personal cost (such as costly sharing), substantial prosociality emerges somewhat later. A good measure of costly sharing is the Dictator Game (DG), in which participants are given an endowment of rewards and allowed to divide that endowment between themselves and other individuals should they wish to do so. By 3–5 years of age, children generously give their own rewards to others in a DG, but both the number of children who give and the total number of rewards given increases with age (Benenson, Pascoe, & Radmore, 2007; Blake & Rand, 2010; Fehr, Bernhard, & Rockenbach, 2008). Across different kinds of tasks, the overall pattern in children's sharing appears to be one of increasing aversion to unequal/inequitable outcomes between 3 and 8 years of age (Blake & McAuliffe, 2011; Fehr et al., 2008; McAuliffe, Blake, Kim, Wrangham, & Warneken, 2013). Costly sharing and aversion to inequity seem to be largely similar across societies in early childhood, with societal variation emerging at the transition to middle childhood around 5–8 years of age (Blake et al., 2015; Cowell et al., 2017; House, 2017; Rochat et al., 2009), approximating adult-like patterns of behavior by about 11–14 years of age (House et al., 2013).

The psychological foundations of our understanding of norms also develops early, with children as young as 3 years enforcing normative behavior in third parties (Schmidt & Rakoczy, 2016), and protesting what adults would consider to be moral violations such as harming others and destroying others' property (Rossano, Rakoczy, & Tomasello, 2011; Vaish, Missana, & Tomasello, 2011). Research on social domain theory shows that by about this same age children also begin to distinguish between moral and conventional norms. Children aged 2–5 years largely agree with adults on what constitutes a “moral” violation rather than a “conventional” violation (Nucci & Turiel, 1978), and 3- and 4-year-olds believe that moral violations should be punished more severely (Smetana, 1981; Smetana & Braeges, 1990). In addition, 3-year-olds protest moral violations equally for members of their own group and members of other groups while protesting conventional violations only for in-group members, suggesting that they (like adults) expect conventional norms to be more group specific and variable than moral norms (Schmidt, Rakoczy, & Tomasello, 2012).

Young children of this age are also sensitive to descriptive norms based on information about how common a behavior is, which are generally distinguished from injunctive norms based on information about what “ought” to be done (moral and conventional norms would generally fall under this category). Children aged 3 or 4 years preferentially conform to behaviors that are common (Corriveau & Harris, 2010; Haun & Tomasello, 2011; Haun, van Leeuwen, & Edelson, 2013; Morgan, Laland, & Harris, 2015; Walker & Andrade, 1996), although their facility with using such information increases substantially between 3 and 7 years of age (Morgan et al., 2015).

How do social norms come to influence costly sharing during childhood? Children may begin to base their sharing on learned social norms in middle childhood, the age at which societal variation in costly sharing and inequity aversion begin to emerge (Blake et al., 2015; Cowell et al., 2017; House, 2017; House et al., 2013). If such societal variation in sharing is caused by individuals conforming to culturally unique social norms, then we would expect that children should begin to model their costly sharing behavior on social norms at the same age when societal variation in costly sharing emerges (i.e., middle childhood). Note that the claim is not that children are unaware of norms about

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