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## Follow (or don't follow) the crowd: Young children's conformity is influenced by norm domain and age



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### ABSTRACT

This study investigated whether young children's conformity to a consensus varies across the normative domain and age. A total of 168 3- and 5-year-olds participated. Each child was presented with a puzzle box that had two transparent compartments. In a reward preference condition, one of the compartments contained 1 sticker, whereas the other compartment contained 12 stickers. In perceptual judgment and arbitrary preference conditions, one compartment contained a short plank, whereas one contained a perceptually longer plank. Each child was shown a video of four female adults, each of whom was asked the same question within condition: "Which one's the biggest?" (perceptual task; each model retrieved the smaller block), "Which one do you want?" (reward preference; each model retrieved the smaller reward), and "Which one do you want?" (arbitrary preference; each model retrieved the smaller plank). Children were then asked the same question by condition and were allowed to retrieve the item. Notably, more children conformed in the arbitrary preference condition than in the reward preference and perceptual judgment conditions, with 3-year-olds conforming significantly more than 5-year-olds. The 5-year-olds were more successful and imitated with greater fidelity, including demonstrating overimitation. However, less overimitation was observed in the arbitrary preference condition. Together, these findings show that children are sensitive to the contextual cues of the domain in which they

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are witnessing norms and vary their own conformity based on such cues. Furthermore, children can navigate which information to copy to fulfil their own ends.

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## Introduction

Conformity to norms has a powerful influence on individual judgments, attitudes, and behavior, as demonstrated by the classic work of [Sherif \(1935, 1936, 1937\)](#) and [Asch \(1951, 1955, 1956\)](#). Due to the critical role of conformity in our choices and behavior, it is essential that we understand how judgments arise in the face of conflicts in normative information; notably, the conflict between individuals' personal information and the majority's behavior ([Asch, 1951](#)) as well as between different types of information presented by norms, "injunctive" information about what one should do and "descriptive" information about what the majority does ([Deutsch & Gerard, 1955](#)). "Social norms" and "conformity" are terms with many uses, and as a result there is no consensus about meaning ([Bicchieri & Muldoon, 2014](#); [Chung & Rimal, 2016](#)). For the purpose of the current study, we use "norm" to mean the behavior adopted by the majority of a group and "conformity" to mean behaving in line with the majority behavior. A "consensus" is an unanimous group behavior. For instance, if most individuals do not litter, this is the norm; if all individuals do not litter, that is a consensus; and if I do not litter because of the influence of the group, I am conforming. Recently, the influence of norms has been examined in the context of children's learning, addressing questions relating to how children use norms to guide their own learning and behavior (e.g., [Corriveau, Fusaro, & Harris, 2009](#); [Morgan, Laland, & Harris, 2015](#); [Turner, Nielsen, & Collier-Baker, 2014](#)). The aim of the current study was to examine how levels of children's behavioral conformity to the descriptive norm vary by task domain; we discuss our results in terms of the possible processes that may cause the effects found.

Young children conform to social cues provided by majorities; that is, 3- and 4-year-olds prefer the label given to an ambiguous object by a consensus of three individuals rather than the label given by a single individual ([Corriveau et al., 2009](#)), showing adoption of descriptive norms. Furthermore, 4-year-olds adopt the behavior of an informant whose response is supported by a group, through the smiles and head nods of two bystanders, over an informant who receives head shakes and frowns from the two bystanders ([Fusaro & Harris, 2008](#)), thereby showing support for children's use of injunctive norms. [Turner and colleagues \(2014\)](#) compared 3-year-olds' use of these different forms of normative behavior, finding that children are influenced by descriptive norms over injunctive norms when the two are misaligned.

Conflicts also occur in relation to copying the majority versus the minority. Conforming to conventions is critical to societal functioning because it allows new members of a group to pick up the social norms quickly without needing to understand the rationale behind them. However, it is also essential that individuals do not blindly conform, adopting the behavior of the majority when in fact this may be disadvantageous to the individual as well as to the group as a whole ([Del Vicario et al., 2016](#)), which can result in detrimental "information cascades" ([Rieucou & Giraldeau, 2009](#)). Furthermore, as well as not conforming to avoid the adoption of inferior behavior, individuals need to break from the status quo for new advantageous innovations to appear within technological and social practices ([Dean, Vale, Laland, Flynn, & Kendal, 2014](#)). Thus, it is critical that we understand how normativity affects learning in children and how biases for majority copying versus personal interests and information are navigated.

Explaining fidelity (copying) versus selectivity (using alternative options) in many realms of child learning remains a challenge. [Over and Carpenter \(2012\)](#) stated that although children can appear credulous, on other occasions they can be discriminating and rational in their learning, whether from several models or one model. For instance, research into the imitation of causally irrelevant actions, known as "overimitation," has shown that children (and adults) copy irrelevant actions under many

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