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## What drives young children to over-imitate? Investigating the effects of age, context, action type, and transitivity



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### ABSTRACT

Imitation underlies many traits thought to characterize our species, which includes the transmission and acquisition of language, material culture, norms, rituals, and conventions. From early childhood, humans show an intriguing willingness to imitate behaviors, even those that have no obvious function. This phenomenon, known as “over-imitation,” is thought to explain some of the key differences between human cultures as compared with those of nonhuman animals. Here, we used a single integrative paradigm to simultaneously investigate several key factors proposed to shape children’s over-imitation: age, context, transitivity, and action type. We compared typically developing children aged 4–6 years in a task involving actions verbally framed as being instrumental, normative, or communicative in function. Within these contexts, we explored whether children were more likely to over-imitate transitive versus intransitive actions and manual versus body part actions. Results showed an interaction between age and context; as children got older, they were more likely to imitate within a normative context, whereas younger children were more likely to imitate in instrumental contexts. Younger children were more likely to imitate transitive actions (actions on objects) than intransitive actions compared with older children. Our results show that children are highly sensitive to even minimal cues to perceived context and flexibly adapt their imitation accordingly. As they get older, children’s imitation appears to become less

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object bound, less focused on instrumental outcomes, and more sensitive to normative cues. This shift is consistent with the proposal that over-imitation becomes increasingly social in its function as children move through childhood and beyond.

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## Introduction

Imitation is a hallmark of the human cultural capacity and underlies many of the core aspects of what it means to be human; it plays a key role in the acquisition and transmission of both material culture and language as well as social norms, rituals, and conventions (Legare & Nielsen, 2015; Meltzoff & Prinz, 2002; Tomasello, 1999; Whiten, 2013; Whiten, 2017). From early on in development, children spontaneously imitate the complex actions of others (Tomasello, 1999), a capacity that increases steadily with age (McGuigan, Gladstone, & Cook, 2012; McGuigan, Makinson, & Whiten, 2011; McGuigan, Whiten, Flynn, & Horner, 2007; Whiten, Caldwell, & Mesoudi, 2016). Given the importance of imitation to both human cultural and social life, one obvious question concerns how imitation emerges across development, and, in particular, which factors shape what and why children imitate.

Developmental research consistently shows that children are strongly motivated to copy others and often do so with a high degree of fidelity (Hopper, Lambeth, Schapiro, & Whiten, 2008; McGuigan et al., 2011; McGuigan et al., 2012; Whiten, Custance, Gomez, Teixidor, & Bard, 1996; Whiten & Flynn, 2010). Children prefer to learn socially than individually (Flynn, Turner, & Giraldeau, 2016), and their tendency to imitate increases with age (McGuigan et al., 2007; McGuigan et al., 2011; McGuigan et al., 2012; Whiten et al., 2016). In some cases, children copy so faithfully that they are even willing to copy actions that are visibly causally irrelevant, a phenomenon known as “over-imitation” (Horner & Whiten, 2005; Lyons, Young, & Keil, 2007; Over & Carpenter, 2012, 2013). Whereas other animals may show some competence toward imitation (Bugnyar & Huber, 1997; Huber et al., 2009), over-imitation itself appears to be a uniquely human phenomenon and, as such, is sometimes discussed as a hallmark of human culture (Clay & Tennie, 2017; Horner & Whiten, 2005; Nielsen, Moore, & Mohamedally, 2012; Tennie, Call, & Tomasello, 2012).

Multiple explanations have been offered for over-imitation, and they broadly fall into two categories: *instrumental* and *social*. The best-known variant of an instrumental account was offered by Lyons et al. (2007), who argued that children’s over-imitation is primarily due to their perception of the action as being causally opaque; that is, children mistakenly perceive actions that are seemingly unfamiliar as being causally relevant and, thus, copy them in order to acquire instrumental skills (Lyons, Damrosch, Lin, Macris, & Keil, 2011; Lyons et al., 2007; Whiten, McGuigan, Marshall-Pescini, & Hopper, 2009).

Although the instrumental account may explain children’s over-imitation in some situations, recent research has shown that over-imitation is also notably influenced by social factors (Over & Carpenter, 2012, 2013). Social explanations for over-imitation have focused mainly on affiliation and norm following. The “normative” or “conventional” account proposes that children over-imitate as a result of perceived social pressures, namely in regard to perceived norms, conventions, or rituals (Clegg & Legare, 2015, 2016; Kenward, 2012; Legare & Nielsen, 2015; Legare & Watson-Jones, 2015; Moraru, Gomez, & McGuigan, 2016). This account, henceforth referred to as “normative,” is supported by evidence that children will actively protest against a puppet that omits a causally irrelevant action after having seen it being performed by a demonstrator (Kenward, 2012; Keupp, Behne, & Rakoczy, 2013). The second social account, complementary to this, proposes that children over-imitate in order to *be like* or *affiliate with* others (Over & Carpenter, 2012, 2013; Uzgiris, 1981). Both accounts are consistent with evidence showing that children are more likely to copy in-group members than out-group members (Kinzler, Corriveau, & Harris, 2011), are more likely to copy after being primed with third-

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