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Young children's inclusion decisions in moral and social–conventional group norm contexts

Michael T. Rizzo^{a,*}, Shelby Cooley^b, Laura Elenbaas^a, Melanie Killen^a

^a Department of Human Development and Quantitative Methodology, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742, USA

^b Community Center for Education Results, Seattle, WA 98144, USA

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ABSTRACT

Being a member of a peer group involves making decisions about whom to include in or exclude from the group. Sometimes these decisions are related to whether members of the group support or challenge the norms of the group. To examine how young children weigh concerns for group norms and group membership in both moral and social–conventional norm contexts, children (3- to 6-year-olds; $N = 73$) were asked to decide between including an ingroup member who challenged the group's norm or an outgroup member who supported the norm. Groups held either moral (equal or unequal resource allocation) or social–conventional (traditional or nontraditional) norms. In the moral contexts, children were more likely to include the peer who advocated for the moral concern for equality regardless of the peer's group membership or their group's specific norm. In the social–conventional contexts, however, children were more likely to include the peer who advocated for the conventional concern for maintaining traditions but only at the group-specific level. Furthermore, with age children increasingly based their inclusion decisions on normative concerns, rather than on group membership concerns, and differed in their inclusion decisions for ingroups and outgroups. Finally, children reasoned about their decisions by referencing concerns for fairness, group norms, and group membership, suggesting that preschool children weigh multiple concerns when deciding whom to include in their groups. Overall, the current study revealed differences in how preschool children weigh moral and social–conventional concerns in intergroup contexts.

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* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: mtrizzo@umd.edu (M.T. Rizzo).

Introduction

Recent research has demonstrated numerous ways in which young children understand the normative aspects of social contexts (Killen & Rutland, 2011; Paulus, 2016; Rhodes, 2012; Schmidt, Butler, Heinz, & Tomasello, 2016; Tomasello, 2016). For instance, young children demonstrate an emerging expectation that conventional norms (e.g., how a toy is played with, the rules of a game) are binding for group members and will often endorse and enforce norms related to moral principles such as dividing resources equally (Cooley & Killen, 2015; Paulus & Moore, 2014; Schmidt & Tomasello, 2012). Furthermore, children's concern for group norms is particularly important when deciding whom to include in their social groups. By 9–13 years of age, children give priority to concerns for group norms in many contexts. For example, children will preferentially include an outgroup member who supports ingroup norms over an ingroup member who rejects the norms (Killen, Rutland, Abrams, Mulvey, & Hitti, 2013; Mulvey, Hitti, Rutland, Abrams, & Killen, 2014), particularly when norms are about equality. What is not yet known, however, is how children weigh these factors early in development (3- to 6-year-olds) and whether young children also vary their decisions about whom to include in their group as a function of the group's norm.

Whereas unanimity is often critical to children's understanding of group norms during early childhood (Schmidt, Rakoczy, Mietzsch, & Tomasello, 2016), there are also instances in which individuals reject established norms. In particular, children may challenge their group's norms when they conflict with larger societal expectations or when enforcement of the norms would result in a moral transgression. In these contexts, children need to weigh their evaluation of group-specific norms with broader societal norms (e.g., generic norms). Social psychologists have defined generic norms as rules and values that hold weight both in the larger societal context and within a specific group or subset of that society (Abrams, Hogg, & Marques, 2005). Group-specific norms, by contrast, are defined as those that are endorsed by a particular local group but do not necessarily hold normative weight in the larger societal context. Conflicts between group-specific and generic norms are especially apparent in resource allocation contexts, where a group may hold a specific norm to take more resources for themselves, which conflicts with the generic moral norm of equality (Killen et al., 2013).

Prior studies have also shown that inclusion decisions (i.e., decisions about whom to include in one's social group) reveal children's capacity to consider and give priority to different goals, especially when children need to decide between including one of two individuals who reflect different positions in the group, values, or group membership (Killen et al., 2013). Forced-choice inclusion decisions are frequently occurring events in children's lives when space is limited or the conditions are such that "only one more person" can be admitted into the group, and these decisions have meaningful implications for children's social development. For example, prior research asking young adolescents to make such decisions has found that, with age, individuals will select peers who support the norms of the group (see Elenbaas & Killen, 2016, for a recent review). The current study examined young children's decisions about whom to include in social groups and how these decisions vary as a function of the norm of the group. In particular, we focused on two types of norms: moral and social-conventional.

Theoretical model: Social reasoning developmental model

This study was framed by an integrative theory of social and moral development referred to as the social reasoning developmental (SRD) model (Rutland, Killen, & Abrams, 2010). Drawing on social domain theory (Smetana, 2006; Turiel, 2002, 2006, 2014) and developmental social identity theory (Abrams & Rutland, 2008; Nesdale, 2008; Verkuyten, 2007), the SRD model proposes that when children make decisions in social contexts, they reason about multiple moral and group concerns, seeking a balance between moral principles regarding the fair treatment of others and group considerations for conventions and traditions. Moral issues are those that individuals view as prescriptive norms about how to treat others with respect to fairness, justice, others' welfare, and rights, whereas conventional issues are those that individuals view as designed to make groups function well such as traditions, conventions, and etiquette.

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