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# Normative expectations about fairness: The development of a charity norm in preschoolers

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigated preschool children's normative expectations about the fair distribution of resources. We examined whether preschool children have a norm of charity, that is, a norm to give more to poor individuals than to wealthy individuals. To this end, we presented 3- to 6-year-olds ( $N = 81$ ) with two different resource allocation situations. In one situation, an agent complied with a norm of charity by allocating more resources to a poor recipient than to a rich recipient. In the other situation, a different agent violated the norm by allocating more resources to a wealthy recipient. We assessed (a) children's verbal protest and affirmation during the resource allocation situations, (b) their punishing and rewarding behavior toward the agents, and (c) their evaluations of the agents' behavior. The results show that older (5- and 6-year-old) preschool children enforced norm-compliant behavior and protested against the norm violation of the protagonist who gave more items to the wealthy recipient, but this was not the case in younger preschool children. These findings demonstrate that older preschool children consider charity as a norm and enforce this norm toward third parties.

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### Introduction

Charity, defined as the propensity to give more to the poor than to the rich, is among the most prominent examples of prosociality in humans. It has traditionally been a central issue of

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considerations in theology (e.g., “*caritas*” as one of the three virtues in Christian theology) as well as in philosophy (e.g., Kant, 1997; Singer, 1972), and in Western and Oriental cultures charity is often referred to as a social norm to which people should adhere. Given the high relevance that has been assigned to the norm of charity at all times, it is striking that we know little about its early ontogeny. One central question concerns whether charity is normatively represented even in young children and, if so, at which point in development humans acquire a norm of charity. This is a crucial question because norms have a great impact on our social lives by providing standards that can motivate behavior among social partners (e.g., Bergman, 2002; Gibbs, 2003). Surprisingly, past developmental research has mainly focused on norms concerning antisocial behavior (e.g., Kenward & Östth, 2012; Kenward & Östth, 2015; Vaish, Missana, & Tomasello, 2011), whereas the normative foundations of prosocial behavior, especially of charity, remain rather unstudied. However, especially prosocial norms are highly relevant regarding the positive outcomes they can cause when transformed into behavior (Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, Bandura, & Zimbardo, 2000; Clark & Ladd, 2000). The current study aimed to close this research gap by examining the developmental onset and early forms of normativity in the domain of prosocial behavior, focusing on a norm of charity.

When studying the normative foundations of charity, it is crucial to distinguish between different levels on which charity could arise: a behavioral level and a normative level. On a behavioral level, charity – here defined as the tendency to give more to poor recipients than to rich recipients – has been observed in elementary school children (Kienbaum & Wilkening, 2009; Shutts, Brey, Dornbusch, Slywotzky, & Olson, 2016) as well as in preschoolers (Li, Spitzer, & Olson, 2014; Paulus & Leitherer, 2017, *this issue*). For example, the ability to consider the relative wealth of different recipients seems to develop between 3 and 5 years of age, with converging evidence from resource allocation scenarios (where children could distribute items between others) and sharing scenarios (where children could distribute items between themselves and others) (Paulus, 2014a). In 5-year-olds, charitable behavior even overruled children’s inclination for equal distribution that has been found in other paradigms (e.g., Shaw & Olson, 2012; Ulber, Hamann, & Tomasello, 2015; Wittig, Jensen, & Tomasello, 2013). A recent study also showed that the tendency to favor a recipient with higher need increased between 4 and 8 years of age (Malti et al., 2016).

The reported findings give an informative picture about the development of charitable behavior, that is, charity on a behavioral level. However, the fact that a principle of charity becomes evident on the behavioral level does not provide conclusive evidence that it is also present on the normative level (and vice versa), which specifies what children think that one *ought to do*. Although charitable behavior and prosocial behavior in general can indeed be motivated by norms, they can also be motivated by other factors, for example, empathy with a poor person or strategic considerations to establish a reputation of being generous (for reviews see Brownell, 2013; Martin & Olson, 2015; Paulus, 2014b). On the other hand, one could consider a certain norm as valid but fail to adhere to this norm for different reasons, including poor self-regulation skills. In the literature, this phenomenon has been referred to as the “judgment–behavior gap” (Smith, Blake, & Harris, 2013). Against this background, it becomes evident that when we want to study whether charity is normatively represented in children, more direct measures of normativity need to be applied.

Informative measures for the presence of a social norm like charity can be directly derived from the characteristics of social norms. One critical characteristic is their normative force and generality, which means that social norms set the standard for one’s own behavior and serve as the basis for the evaluation of others’ behavior (cf. Nagel, 1970). In other words, norms apply in an agent-neutral way likewise to oneself and to other people. Due to this agent-neutral validity, a clear indication of normativity would be the reaction of a third-party observer to a certain behavior in the form of protest or criticism (negative reactions) if norms are violated and in the form of affirmation (positive reactions) if norms are obeyed. Because observers are not affected by the critical behavior themselves, self-interest is unlikely to explain such reactions. Rather, it is the agent-neutral validity of norms that makes them concerned about what they are observing (cf. Rakoczy & Schmidt, 2013; Schmidt & Tomasello, 2012). Such reactions provide evidence for normative understanding. Consequently, in an attempt to examine the existence of a norm of charity in preschoolers, we rely on a measure of protest/affirmation.

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