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Preschoolers, but not adults, treat instrumental norms as categorical imperatives

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ABSTRACT

Hypothetical norms apply only when agents have specific goals, whereas *categorical* norms apply regardless of what agents want. Deciding whether a rule is hypothetical or categorical is crucial for navigating many social situations encountered by children and adults. The current research investigated whether preschoolers viewed *instrumental* norms (about how to accomplish practical tasks), *prudential* norms (pertaining to agent welfare), and *moral* norms (pertaining to others' welfare) as hypothetical or categorical. A second main question was whether preschoolers draw distinctions between instrumental and other norms. Participants were interviewed about norm violations in which the agent did or did not have the relevant goal. The goal manipulation had no effect on children's judgments of permissibility; most children treated all three norm types as categorical. Nevertheless, children distinguished instrumental events from prudential and moral events along several dimensions. In contrast, participants in two adult samples treated instrumental norms, and some prudential norms, as hypothetical, but treated moral norms as categorical (applicable regardless of agent goal). These findings suggest that preschoolers do not yet reliably distinguish between hypothetical and categorical norms, yet do view rules of instrumental rationality as a distinct type of norms.

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Introduction

All imperatives command either *hypothetically* or *categorically*. Hypothetical imperatives declare a possible action to be practically necessary as a means to the attainment of something else that one wills (or that one may will). A categorical imperative would be one which represented an action as objectively necessary in itself apart from its relation to a further end.

[Kant (1785/1991, p. 78)]

Imagine a child repeatedly hitting the side of a nail with a hammer. After inferring that the child wants to hit the nail into the wood, her parent may say, “Don’t hit the side of the nail with the hammer!” Now imagine the same child hitting a friend. In this case, a parent may say, “Don’t hit your friend!” without consideration of the child’s goals. The instrumental command about how to hit the nail into the wood is a *hypothetical* imperative because it applies only when the agent has the goal promoted by the proscribed action. For instance, the norm about hitting the nail on its head applies only if the agent wants to hit the nail into the wood. Hence, hypothetical imperatives imply that “if you want goal X, then you should do action A” (Kant, 1785/1991; Kohlberg, 1971; Turiel, 1983). The second command about how to treat another person exemplifies *categorical* imperatives, which apply independently of the agent’s goal and simply say that “you should do C (regardless of what you want).”

The formal distinction between hypothetical and categorical norms is central to most theories of the development of norms. Theorists have often proposed that some types of norms are viewed as hypothetical, whereas other types of norms are viewed as categorical. By most accounts, *instrumental* norms—which specify how to reach practical goals—are a prototypical case of hypothetical norms (e.g., Kant, 1785/1991). For instance, the rule about how to make a Martini applies only to agents who wish to make a Martini (Kohlberg, 1971), and rules for how to put together IKEA furniture apply only to agents who wish to put together IKEA furniture.

In contrast, most theorists view moral norms about how to treat others as categorical and, hence, applicable regardless of what the agent wants (Josephs & Rakoczy, 2016; Kohlberg, 1971; Turiel, 1983). According to these accounts, most people endorse categorical moral obligations to promote and protect the welfare of others by not harming others and, in some situations, by helping others (Miller, Bersoff, & Harwood, 1990; Turiel, 2015b). These moral obligations are said to be categorical in the sense that they are viewed as applicable regardless of whether the agent happens to be concerned with other people’s welfare. However, these proposed connections between the perceived categorical or hypothetical *form* of norms and the moral, instrumental, or other *substance* of the norm have not been directly tested in past research on children’s and adults’ conceptions of norms.

The ability to distinguish between hypothetical and categorical norms is integral to developing an understanding of the function and scope of norms. For instance, if a parent tells a child, “Don’t do your jigsaw puzzle by the staircase!” a child’s response to this command may depend on whether the child perceives this as a hypothetical or categorical imperative. If the parent means, “If you want good lighting when you do the puzzle, you should not do it by the staircase” (a hypothetical imperative), the child may agree with the parent yet decide to remain by the staircase because she does not care about better lighting. In contrast, if the parent means, “You shouldn’t do your puzzle by the staircase no matter what” (a categorical imperative), the child will need to decide whether to comply or explicitly challenge the parental command.

One main goal of the current research was to investigate whether preschoolers distinguished between hypothetical and categorical norms when reasoning about three common types of norms: instrumental norms for how to carry out material tasks, prudential norms for how to protect agents’ own welfare, and moral norms for how to protect others’ welfare. A second main goal was to investigate preschoolers’ conceptions of instrumental norms.

Instrumental norms have received little attention in past research on the development of normative orientations (see, e.g., Killen & Smetana, 2015; Smetana, 2013; Turiel, 2015a). Because so little is known about adults’ distinctions between hypothetical and categorical norms, or about their conceptions of instrumental norms, the current research also included a sample of adults. The adult sample

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