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Young children consider individual authority and collective agreement when deciding who can change rules

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ABSTRACT

Young children demonstrate awareness of normativity in various domains of social learning. It is unclear, however, whether children recognize that rules can be changed in certain contexts and by certain people or groups. Across three studies, we provided empirical evidence that children consider individual authority and collective agreement when reasoning about who can change rules. In Study 1, children aged 4–7 years watched videos of children playing simply sorting and stacking games in groups or alone. Across conditions, the group game was initiated (a) by one child, (b) by collaborative agreement, or (c) by an adult authority figure. In the group games with a rule initiated by one child, children attributed ability to change rules only to that individual and not his or her friends, and they mentioned ownership and authority in their explanations. When the rule was initiated collaboratively, older children said that no individual could change the rule, whereas younger children said that either individual could do so. When an adult initiated the rule, children stated that only the adult could change it. In contrast, children always endorsed a child's decision to change his or her own solitary rule and never endorsed any child's ability to change moral and conventional rules in daily life. Age differences corresponded to beliefs about friendship and agreement in peer play (Study 2) and disappeared when the decision process behind and normative force of collaboratively initiated rules were clarified (Study 3). These results show important connections

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between normativity and considerations of authority and collaboration during early childhood.

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Introduction

The development of human societies has witnessed many examples of changes of rules; advances in human rights lead to changes in human laws, and advances in technology lead to changes in rules governing the technology world. Thus, our normative knowledge includes a recognition that rule following is important and an appreciation of cases in which rules can (and might need to) be changed. The development of the former type of knowledge has been investigated extensively in young children, but little attention has been paid to the latter type of knowledge. The aim of the current study was to investigate how children reason about changes of rules.

Interest in the origins of children's understanding of rules and norms dates back to Piaget (1932/1965), who interviewed children about how they view rules in marble games. Piaget identified the tension that children at some times treat rules as fixed and inalterable while at other times view rules as flexible and alterable based on mutual agreement. This "fixed versus flexible" tension can also be seen in the way children respond to social norms and rules in the current literature.

The idea that young children at times view rules as inalterable has empirical support from numerous studies showing the early emergence of norm sensitivity in young children's reasoning about artifact use, social norms, and moral rules (e.g., Casler & Kelemen, 2005; Diesendruck & Markson, 2011; Kalish & Shiverick, 2004; Schmidt, Rakoczy, & Tomasello, 2012; Smetana, 1981; Smetana & Braeges, 1990). For example, in observational studies of family interactions, toddlers talk about the permissibility of actions, use social rules to explain and justify their behaviors, and protest against others' rule violations in their interactions with parents and siblings (Dunn & Munn, 1985, 1987). Even in laboratory settings, children follow and enforce arbitrary rules immediately after being introduced to them (Rakoczy, 2008; Rakoczy, Brosche, Warneken, & Tomasello, 2009; Rakoczy, Warneken, & Tomasello, 2008; Wyman, Rakoczy, & Tomasello, 2009). In seminal work by Rakoczy and colleagues, after being taught by the experimenter how to play a game with a novel rule, 3-year-olds later spontaneously protested and criticized a new agent (a puppet) who joined and played the same game in a different way. Similar results were found even when the experimenter did not use any language (e.g., labeling: "this is daxing") or teaching behaviors (e.g., addressing the children) to indicate the presence of a rule (Schmidt, Butler, Heinz, & Tomasello, 2016).

These studies lend support to the idea that young children view rules as fixed and also perhaps suggest that they see rules as inalterable. However, it should be noted that all of these studies involve receiving information about rules from adult authority figures (e.g., parents, teachers, experimenters) where children have little authority over the rules. Indeed, young children distinguish between contexts where parents and teachers are legitimate authorities regulating rules (e.g., in the case of moral rules) and contexts where they have personal authority or autonomy to make their own decisions (Laupa & Turiel, 1993; Nucci & Weber, 1995). At around the same age, children can reason that even a child has authority over things he or she owns and that authority enables the child to make decisions about who can use an object (Friedman & Neary, 2008; Nancekivell, Van de Vondervoort, & Friedman, 2013). Thus, one of the aims of our study was to empirically investigate whether children consider issues of authority when deciding who can change rules.

A few previous studies have asked children questions about changes to rules (Davidson, Turiel, & Black, 1983; Hollos, Leis, & Turiel, 1986; Turiel, 1998). These studies focused on the distinction between moral rules, which pertain to violations of common good, justice, and others' well-being (e.g., harming, not sharing), and conventional rules, which are arbitrarily decided by social groups (e.g., what to wear, where to sit). These distinctions influence how young children judge rule violations in terms of seriousness, contingency, and generalizability; they rate conventional transgressions

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