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## Children's descriptive-to-prescriptive tendency replicates (and varies) cross-culturally: Evidence from China

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## ABSTRACT

Research with U.S. samples found that children use descriptive group regularities (characteristics shared by individuals within a group) to generate prescriptive judgments (characteristics that *should be* shared by individuals within a group). Here, we assessed this descriptive-to-prescriptive tendency in a sample of children (ages 4–13 years) and adults (ages 18–40 years) from mainland China. Participants were introduced to novel groups (i.e., Hibbles and Glerks) who engaged in contrasting morally neutral behaviors (e.g., listening to different kinds of music) and then to conforming and non-conforming individuals (e.g., a Hibble who listened to music more typical of Glerks). Like U.S. children, Chinese children disapproved of non-conformity and rates of disapproval declined with age. However, compared with U.S. children, younger Chinese children (ages 4–6 years) rated non-conformity more disapprovingly, and unlike U.S. adults, Chinese adults rated non-conformity more negatively than conformity. Moreover, compared with U.S. participants, Chinese participants across all age groups appealed more often to norm-based explanations when justifying their disapproval. These data provide a cross-cultural replication of children's descriptive-to-prescriptive tendency but also reveal cross-cultural variation, and they have implications for understanding the mechanisms that underlie stereotyping and normative reasoning.

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## Introduction

Recent research found that children use descriptive group regularities (the way a group *is*) to make prescriptive judgments (the way a group *should be*) (Roberts, Gelman, & Ho, 2016). Specifically, Roberts et al. (2016) introduced middle-class U.S. children (ages 4–13 years) to two novel groups, Hibbles and Glerks, who differed from each other in innocuous behaviors (e.g., listened to a certain kind of music, ate a certain kind of food). When shown non-conforming group members (e.g., a Hibble who listened to a kind of music that was more typical of Glerks), children, particularly those in the youngest age group (4–6 years), disapproved, evaluated the acts as negative, and explained their evaluations through norm-based reasoning (e.g., “Hibbles are *not allowed* to listen to that kind of music”). Importantly, children’s descriptive-to-prescriptive tendency was robust across intergroup contexts; regardless of whether Hibbles were in cooperation or in competition with Glerks, children judged that it was bad for Hibbles to not conform to their group. Critically, however, when the emphasis was on individuals and not on groups, children were more accepting of non-conformity.

In a follow-up study, Roberts, Ho, and Gelman (2017) found that relatively minimal input generated children’s prescriptiveness. That is, previous research demonstrates that group presence, group labels, and generic statements independently provide children with cues to group membership (Bigler & Liben, 2006; Rhodes, Leslie, & Tworek, 2012; Waxman, 2010), and all these factors were provided simultaneously to children in Roberts et al. (2016). To more precisely understand what information children used to detect group regularities, Roberts et al. (2016) randomly assigned children (ages 4–9 years) to one of four conditions that manipulated how regularities were presented: group presence (e.g., “These ones [a group of three individuals] listen to this kind of music”), group labels (e.g., [showing an individual] “This Hibble listens to this kind of music”), generics (e.g., [showing an individual] “Hibbles listen to this kind of music”), or control (e.g., “This one [individual] listens to this kind of music”). Children evaluated non-conformity negatively in all conditions but the control condition, demonstrating that group presence, category labels, and generic statements each provoked children to treat social groups as having normative force, thereby highlighting further how easily children take on a normative stance.

Taken together, the findings reported by Roberts et al. (2016, 2017) provided new insight into children’s normative reasoning and highlighted the profound implications group concepts have for stereotyping and normative reasoning. If a group is characterized by a property, children believe that individual group members *should be* characterized by that property. The readiness, robustness, and ease with which children’s descriptive-to-prescriptive tendency is elicited may be evolutionarily rooted in humans’ group-based way of life. That is, recognizing and conforming to group norms is adaptive for the self (e.g., leading to social acceptance and opportunities for collaborative learning) and the group (e.g., leading to more efficient group functioning and strength against competing groups) (Tomasello, 2016). Thus, individuals who can quickly learn, adopt, and enforce their group’s norms are model group members as they increase their own (and their group’s) functioning, resources, and survival.

Consistent with the notion that a preference for normative conformity has evolutionary roots, recent research demonstrates that early in development concepts of norms play a critical role in children’s social cognition (Rakoczy & Schmidt, 2013). For example, preschoolers are quick to learn norms (Rakoczy, Warneken, & Tomasello, 2008), especially when they are modeled by adults (Rakoczy, Hamann, Warneken, & Tomasello, 2010), and they learn norms even when there is no language or instruction suggesting that they should do so (Schmidt, Rakoczy, & Tomasello, 2011) and even when they see the behavior occur only once (Schmidt, Butler, Heinz, & Tomasello, 2016). In addition, children not only learn norms from others but also spontaneously create their own norms and teach them to others (Göckeritz, Schmidt, & Tomasello, 2014). When they observe someone violate a norm, they feel emotionally agitated (Hardecker, Schmidt, Roden, & Tomasello, 2016) and respond with protest and critique (e.g., “You *can’t* do that!”) (Cooley & Killen, 2015; Rakoczy & Schmidt, 2013; Riggs & Young, 2016) even when they understand that the norm violation was unintentional (Samland, Josephs, Waldmann, & Rakoczy, 2016), but especially when they believe it was freely chosen (Josephs, Kushnir, Gräfenhain, & Rakoczy, 2016). In addition, children show more positive feelings

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