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Brief Report

Children protest moral and conventional violations more when they believe actions are freely chosen



Marina Josephs^{a,*}, Tamar Kushnir^b, Maria Gräfenhain^{a,c}, Hannes Rakoczy^a

^a Institute of Psychology, University of Göttingen, D-37073 Göttingen, Germany

^b Department of Human Development, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY 14853, USA

^c Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Psychotherapy, and Psychosomatics, University of Leipzig, D-04103 Leipzig, Germany

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ABSTRACT

Young children spontaneously engage in normative evaluations of others' actions and actively enforce social norms. It is unclear, however, how flexible and integrated this early norm psychology is. The current study explored this question by testing whether children in their "real-life" normative evaluation of actions consider the actor's freedom of choice. Children witnessed different appropriate acts or mistakes (conventional or moral) by an agent under free or constrained circumstances. Across the two types of norms, participants protested less if a mistake occurred under constrained conditions than if it occurred under free conditions. Furthermore, they laid different weight on the actor's free choice in the two conditions. While refraining from blaming the agent for inappropriate constrained acts in the *moral* scenario, children still criticized a *social conventional* mistake under constrained conditions (although less than under free conditions), indicating that free choice is a more prominent factor in moral evaluations than in conventional evaluations. Thus, two domains of social cognition, normativity and theory of mind, are functionally integrated already early in development.

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* Corresponding author. Fax: +49 551 39 9322.

E-mail address: marina.josephs@psych.uni-goettingen.de (M. Josephs).

Introduction

Recent development research suggests that even very young children spontaneously engage in normative evaluations of others' actions, actively enforcing social norms by criticizing and teaching other agents and by sanctioning mistakes. Such spontaneous norm enforcement emerges from 2 or 3 years of age in the case of violations of different kinds of conventional norms pertaining, for example, to pretense and rule games (Rakoczy, 2008; Rakoczy, Warneken, & Tomasello, 2008), using artifacts (Casler, Terziyan, & Greene, 2009), language use (Rakoczy & Tomasello, 2009) or property (Rossano, Rakoczy, & Tomasello, 2011), and in the case of violations of moral norms pertaining to personal well-being and harm (Schmidt, Rakoczy, & Tomasello, 2012; Vaish, Missana, & Tomasello, 2011; see Rakoczy & Schmidt, 2013, for an overview).

This research, however, remains inconclusive as to how sophisticated and flexible such early norm enforcement is and whether it is systematically connected to children's general social cognition. We know from a huge body of research that young children make reasoned distinctions in their normative evaluations when explicitly interviewed about different kinds of norms (e.g., Smetana et al., 2012). Furthermore, our mature adult evaluation of acts vis-à-vis many forms of social norms essentially builds on the interpretation of the action and its underlying intentions; it is good or ill will that counts in moral evaluation and assignment of guilt and blame. Recent interview studies, in contrast to long-standing assumptions in the tradition of Piaget, suggest that in their abstract normative evaluations of story characters, even preschoolers are not completely blind to such connections. Confronted with story vignettes about different types of transgressions, children distinguish, for example, between acts based on good intentions and acts based on bad intentions even given the same outcomes in both cases (e.g., Harris & Núñez, 1996; Nobes, Panagiotaki, & Pawson, 2009; Núñez, 2011; Núñez & Harris, 1998; Zelazo, Helwig, & Lau, 1996). However, whether children's early norm enforcement in the form of spontaneous protest shows a similar sophistication is still an open research question.

An aspect in our moral practice that is intimately related to assessing agent intentionality (and assigning blame accordingly) is the agent's freedom of choice. Often performing a behavior under free choice and performing it intentionally amount to the same thing. However, although free choice and acting intentionally are indeed intimately connected, their relations are more subtle. Freedom of choice is typically a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for the intentionality of an action, and conversely the absence of choice warrants the inference that a given behavior was not intentional.

The cognitive structure and development of our intuitions about freedom of choice have just recently begun to be explored in cognitive and developmental science (e.g., Baumeister, Masicampo, & DeWall, 2009; Chernyak, Kushnir, Sullivan, & Wang, 2013; Kushnir, 2012; Kushnir, Gopnik, Chernyak, Seiver, & Wellman, 2015; Nichols, 2004; Pizarro & Helzer, 2010). From a set of studies that measured freedom of choice indirectly while focusing on the child's understanding of other mental states (intentions and beliefs), one can conclude that even infants show a fundamental understanding of the different factors that can constrain actions (physical and mental) (see Behne, Carpenter, Call, & Tomasello, 2005; Gergely, Bekkering, & Király, 2002). A new line of research focusing on the explicit measurement of freedom of choice shows that the basic understanding develops to an explicit form at 4 years of age. By then, children can state whether or not a (constrained) action needed to occur the way it did (Kushnir et al., 2015; Nichols, 2004). We also know that preschoolers and young school-age children consider social and moral norms as constraints on choice; that is, they often consider social and moral norms as limiting alternative possibilities for action (Chernyak & Kushnir, 2014; Chernyak et al., 2013).

The current study investigated whether young children take into account the degree of an agent's freedom of choice when evaluating norm violations as worthy of protest or blame. According to adult intuition, freedom of choice has different weights in different normative domains. Freedom is crucial for ascribing intentionality and assigning moral guilt and blame—where the agent's intent is what counts (Guglielmo, Monroe, & Malle, 2009). Assume that a woman makes loud noises knowing that this will seriously annoy her neighbor suffering from a migraine. In one case, she chooses to do so deliberately and freely—a moral mistake worthy of blame. In another case, however, she cannot help making the noise, say, because a heavy object falls on her foot and she screams in pain. Is this a moral

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