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## Cognitive Development



# Judgments of gender norm violations in children from the United States and Korea



Clare Conry-Murray<sup>a</sup>, Jung Min Kim<sup>b,\*</sup>, Elliot Turiel<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Psychology, Saint Joseph's University, Philadelphia, PA 19131, USA

<sup>b</sup> Department of Child Development and Education, Myongji University, Seoul 120-728, Republic of Korea

<sup>c</sup> Department of Education, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720, USA

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### ABSTRACT

Children's judgments of gender norm violations in the U.S. ( $N = 71$ ) and Korea ( $N = 73$ ) were examined at ages 5, 7 and 9 years. Children made judgments of hypothetical children violating gender norms when the violation was performed for a helping goal and when no helping goal was presented. When there was no helping goal, American children were more accepting of violations than Korean children, and older children were more accepting than younger children. However, when the norm was violated in order to help someone, there were no differences between the countries and age differences were diminished, with the majorities of children at each age judging the violation as acceptable.

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## 1. Introduction

Many studies have shown that children in several countries make a distinction between moral issues related to welfare, justice, and rights and conventional issues related to variable rules coordinating social interactions (e.g. Kim & Turiel, 1996; for a review see Turiel, 2006). People around the world value protecting others' welfare and promoting fairness. However, the content of the conventional domain, including issues related to gender norms, may differ in different contexts, and conventional gender norms may be more or less strongly endorsed in different situations, even to the

\* Corresponding author at: 34 Geobukgol-ro, Seodaemun-gu, Seoul 120-728, Republic of Korea. Tel.: +82 2 300 0603.

E-mail address: [jmkim122@mju.ac.kr](mailto:jmkim122@mju.ac.kr) (J.M. Kim).

point that conventions regarding gender may be given priority over moral issues like helping. This is especially possible when gender norms are particularly strong, as they are in some cultures (Conry-Murray, 2009), and at some points in development like early and middle childhood (Conry-Murray & Turiel, 2012). The current study examined how children in early and middle childhood in two cultures judge gender norm violations when the violation helps others and when it does not. The purpose is to examine whether some situations may lead children to be more flexible or accepting in their judgments of gender norm violations, and whether there are age or cultural differences in flexibility.

Therefore, the study examined whether the patterns of inflexibility and flexibility regarding gender norms are the same or different in Korea and the U.S. Korea has been found to have strict social norms (Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002), especially with regard to women's roles (United Nations, 2002). If age differences in how children understand gender norms are similar in two different cultures, it would provide theoretically important initial evidence that the development of judgments about gender involves social cognitive processes in development, and are not only determined by the strength of their endorsement in the social environment. The issue also has applied implications since flexibility in judgments of gender norm violation could have important implications for how children treat peers whose gender-norm related expressions differ from the norm.

Research in the United States shows that age is related to interpretations of gender norms (Katz & Ksiansnak, 1994). Blakemore (2003) has shown that awareness or knowledge of gender norms increases with age through the preschool years, with most preschool age children correctly identifying which sex is associated with gendered activities. However, flexibility about the possibility that someone could engage in violations of gender norms increases through middle childhood. Judgments about the possibility of a violation may be affected by the content of the norms. In Blakemore's (2003) research, some behaviors related to gender norms, including wearing atypical gendered clothing and acting in atypical gendered ways (specifically, girls engaging in rough play), are judged to be less possible around age seven before children become more aware of the possibility of norm violations as they get older.

Flexibility is operationalized differently in different studies, but several studies show that around the ages of 4–7 years of age, children are less likely to demonstrate cognitive flexibility, defined as endorsements of the possibility of gender norm violations (e.g. when asked "Who could play with. . .?" in Katz & Walsh, 1991, or "Can girls also play with. . .?" as in Blakemore, 2003). Other research examined children's judgments of a hypothetical island where a boy is raised entirely by females or a girl is raised solely by males to see if children judged that the child would grow up to have sex typical traits or traits learned from the environment (Levy, Taylor, & Gelman, 1995). Still other research assessed children's judgments of the flexibility of gender norms by asking whether gender norms can be enforced with school rules (Conry-Murray & Turiel, 2012).

Despite differences in methodology of various studies, most of the research in North America shows that children are most inflexible in their thinking about gender norms around the ages of 4–7 years, and that by around age eight they begin to become increasingly flexible (Conry-Murray & Turiel, 2012; Kalish, 2012; Levy et al., 1995; Rhodes & Gelman, 2009; Taylor, 1996; Taylor, Rhodes, & Gelman, 2009; Trautner et al., 2005). The current study examined children between the ages of five and nine to investigate their judgments of whether gender norm violations are acceptable (e.g. "Is it OK or not OK for a boy to wear a dress?"). The purpose was to examine flexibility of judgments differs across cultures and to see if age-related patterns are similar in the two cultures.

Inflexible judgments of gender norm violations may have implications for peer relationships. Peers of children who display atypical gender-related behaviors may be critical of violations and this could impact children's peer acceptance. The current study also included an assessment of children's judgments of the likability of a child who violates gender norms. Levy et al. (1995) call this evaluative rule flexibility, a measure of how much the child would like to be friends with someone who violated a gender norm or other type of rule. Levy et al. found that males liked those who transgress rules less than females, but there were few age differences in this measure of likability. This assessment was included here because it is important to examine how judgments about gender may lead to actions that could influence peer relationships. Judgments about the acceptability of violations may be a lower standard than judgments of likability, especially in cultural settings where gender norms are strict and there may be more stigma to being friends with someone who violates gender norms.

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