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# Young children's creation and transmission of social norms

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ABSTRACT

Children's lives are governed by social norms. Since Piaget, however, it has been assumed that they understand very little about how norms work. Recent studies in which children enforce social norms indicate a richer understanding, but children are still relating to pre-existing adult norms. In this study, triads of 5-year-olds worked on an instrumental task without adult guidance. Children spontaneously created social norms regarding how the game "should" be played. They transmitted these with special force (using more generic and objective language) to novices, suggesting that young children understand to some degree, the conventional nature and special force of social norms in binding all who would participate.



Children are born into societies structured by social norms. These mutually accepted behavioral standards of a group are so powerful that group members must either conform to them or risk being punished or ostracized. Early on, young children begin conforming to behavioral rules issued by adults, but it is unclear whether they understand these directives as simply the wishes of a single person or rather, in some cases at least, as a single person's expression of group agreements regarding proper behavior.

The seminal work in this regard is Piaget's (1932) study of moral judgment. He observed how Swiss children learn and understand the rules of games, such as marbles, handed down among children without adult interference. Based mainly on verbal interviews and naturalistic observations, Piaget depicts preschool and early school age children as heteronomous – they believe rules to be part of an

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external, physical reality. They conform to these rules as they are handed down by authorities and consider them to be "sacred and untouchable." Any modification to them would be wrong, even if accepted by general opinion. Only from around 10 years of age do children become autonomous and allow changes to rules by common agreement.

Other ways of assessing children's judgments, however, reveal that they are more accomplished in their understanding of social norms than Piaget believed. For example, Nucci and Turiel (1978) observed children's natural interactions in preschools and found that they reacted quite differently to normative breaches that involved harm, compared to breaches that were merely conventional. Similarly, Turiel (1983) found that 3–4-year-olds already understand moral and conventional norms differently, such that they regard transgressions of moral norms as more serious, less relative to social context, and less contingent on the presence of a rule, compared to transgressions of conventional norms (see also Smetana, 1981). Other research has focused on children's intuitions about moral and group-related issues, for instance, how these interact and how they are related to prejudice and intergroup attitudes in development (see Rutland, Killen, & Abrams, 2010, for a review).

More recent studies have sought ways other than verbal interviews and naturalistic observations to assess children's understanding of social norms, for example, by putting them directly in interactive situations with norm transgressors. For example, within a novel game-playing context, Rakoczy, Warneken, and Tomasello (2008) found that 3-year-olds, and to some extent even 2-year-olds, overtly express their understanding of the normative structure of conventional games by protesting against the transgressions of third parties, using normative language. This finding reveals that very young children understand conventional norms as not just applying when they themselves are affected. Rather, they understand them in a more agent-neutral way as general, normatively structured, rule-governed forms of action (Rakoczy, Hamann, Warneken, & Tomasello, 2010).

Importantly, children apply social norms in the form of game rules in this agent-neutral way even when the adult who introduces the game does not use any normative or pedagogical language at any time and rather is only incidentally observed performing intentional, game-like actions in a deliberate (and seemingly knowledgeable) way (Rakoczy et al., 2010; Rakoczy & Tomasello, 2007; Schmidt, Rakoczy, & Tomasello, 2011). This finding emphasizes how readily young children infer normativity when witnessing an authority or expert of their culture, enabling them to learn how group members behave and even how they ought to behave (Over & Carpenter, 2012). Assessing children's normative protest has also been extended to recent studies on overimitation, showing that 3 and 5-year-olds view unnecessary actions performed by an adult as normative (Kenward, 2012; Kenward, Karlsson, & Persson, 2011).

Moreover, in their third-party enforcement of conventional norms, preschool children still respect the distinction between moral norms, which apply to all people, and conventional norms that apply to in-group members only (Schmidt, Rakoczy, & Tomasello, 2012). Perhaps most impressive, in the context of pretense, 3-year-olds even understand that conventional norms are based on something like "agreements" that cannot be altered without a change in agreement. Thus they protest when someone treats an object declared to be a pretend sandwich as if it were a pretend bar of soap (Wyman, Rakoczy, & Tomasello, 2009). When children enforce conventional norms on others from a third party stance, it suggests that their protest is not out of a concern for themselves; rather they view the norm as something to be obeyed by all (Rakoczy & Schmidt, 2013; Schmidt & Tomasello, 2012). Third-party protest also demonstrates at least some understanding of the origins of social norms in the common agreements of group members or other individuals, as the child has no personal interest – just an interest as a group member – in its being followed.

Taken together, these recent studies demonstrate that young children's normative protest is based on a normative understanding. Children's appropriate use of normative vocabulary (e.g., wrong/right, must, ought) in these studies can be taken as an especially clear indicator of normative understanding. Other forms of protest such as imperative or descriptive protest (e.g., "Don't do it!") are more ambiguous as they might merely express an individual's personal preference as opposed to a normative expectation. More generally, use of normative language can be seen as a tool to express reigning social norms within a group and is therefore a powerful instrument to generate pressure to conform to the expectations of a group.