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Normativity and context in young children's pretend play

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ABSTRACT

In two studies 3-year-olds' understanding of the context-specificity of normative rules was investigated through games of pretend play. In the first study, children protested against a character who joined a pretend game but treated the target object according to its real function. However, they did not protest when she performed the same action without having first joined the game. In the second study, children protested when the character mixed up an object's pretend identities between two different pretend games. However, they did not protest when she performed the same pretend action in its correct game context. Thus, the studies show that young children see the pretence–reality distinction, and the distinction between different pretence identities, as normative. More generally, the results of these studies demonstrate young children's ability to enforce normative rules in their pretence and to do so context-specifically.

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When growing into their society, young children must come to understand that social practices have a cultural dimension to them, such that members of their group do things a certain way. Some activities, particularly those of a more conventional nature, have a *normative* quality—it is implicit within the group that they *ought* to be done that way. For instance, in some cultures people may greet each other with a handshake, whereas in other cultures this greeting may be considered inappropriate and three kisses on alternating cheeks might be the convention.

In investigating the development of children's moral judgment, [Piaget \(1932\)](#) examined children's ability to practice and theorize about conventional rules in their games. A central idea arising from his research was that before around age 10, children view conventional rules as akin to both moral rules and natural contingencies, that is, as unchangeable and as existing universally. Work in this tradition has, however, gone on to show that children distinguish well between moral and conventional

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norms. Children claim, for example, that while it might be acceptable for people to dress according to different conventions in different cultures, it is unacceptable to steal regardless of the cultural background (Nucci & Nucci, 1982; Turiel, 1978, 1983). Other work has similarly shown that children also distinguish between conventional rules such as ‘children cannot play in the snow without clothes on’, and natural contingencies like ‘children cannot turn into fish’ (Kalish, 1998) and, additionally, recognize that norms such as ‘Anne ought to work alone’ may serve to motivate and guide Anne’s behaviour (Kalish & Shiverick, 2004). Interestingly, young children are better able to reason from prescriptive or ‘deontic’ conditional norms such as ‘if Anne wants to play outside, she must wear her coat’, than descriptive conditionals of similar form, as in ‘when Anne plays outside, she always wears her coat’. Furthermore, this deontic understanding applies both to rules that are set by higher adult authority, as well as those that emerge more organically between children, for example in agreements to swap toys (Harris & Nunez, 1996; Harris, Nunez, & Brett, 2001; Nunez & Harris, 1998). Finally, children appreciate that violations of prescriptive rules may result in upset, such that if Maxi’s mother buys him a bike in return for cleaning his room and Maxi breaks his part of the bargain, his mother might be sad (Keller, Gummerum, Wang, & Lindsey, 2004).

However, developmental work on conventionality since Piaget has focused almost exclusively on children’s understanding of so-called regulative rules, that is, rules that regulate already existing activities. To take an already mentioned example, Anne can play outside, whether the norm is to do so with or without her coat. The fact that the conventional norm is to do so whilst wearing a coat serves to shape her already existing activity. A relatively neglected area in normativity research concerns children’s understanding of the norms associated not with ‘regulative’ rules but with ‘constitutive rules’ (see Rawls, 1955; Searle, 1995). Such rules bring into existence the very activities they govern, and they do this by imposing non-physical or ‘status functions’ on objects and actions. Structurally, status functions have the logical form ‘X counts as Y in a certain context C’. For example, a piece of paper may count as money within the context of our exchange practices, or giving that money away may count as making a purchase in a particular social situation. The point is that the very rules of the exchange make the piece of paper a money token, and make performing a certain action an act of purchasing or selling, etc. (Searle, 1995). Thus, the imposition of non-physical status functions create what are then understood to be ten dollar bills and acts of monetary exchange. Importantly, these practices are also normatively governed in that there are certain ways that objects with status ought to be treated and certain ways that actions with status should be performed. An open developmental question, then, relates to whether young children grasp the norms associated with constitutive rules.

One particularly early and important area in which children appear to learn about constitutive rules is that of pretend play. In pretence, children must grasp that, for instance, a stick may count as a toothbrush, or that side-to-side movements may count as brushing within the context of their game, and they often witness and participate in the creation of constitutive rules of this nature (unlike the pre-established rules of non-pretend rule games; see, e.g., Piaget, 1932; Rakoczy, Warneken, & Tomasello, 2008). It is thus noteworthy that young children appear to understand the basic structure of constitutive rules in their pretence by proficiently and creatively tailoring their pretend actions to an object’s fictional status (Harris & Kavanaugh, 1993) even when this changes between contexts (Wyman, Rakoczy, & Tomasello, *in press*). However, relatively little is known about children’s understanding of the normative component of constitutive rules, and so games of joint pretence offer an interesting opportunity to probe this understanding.

Among established findings in the pretence literature is that 3-year-old children understand the *pretence–reality* distinction. They correctly state, for example, that while an object really is an X (e.g., a spoon), one may pretend that it is a Y (e.g., a ‘telephone’) in the context of a certain make-believe game (Abelev & Markman, 2006; Flavell, Flavell, & Green, 1987; Lillard & Flavell, 1992). Children of this age also differentiate between different pretence identities in different game contexts (what might be called the *pretence–pretence* distinction)—they understand that one and the same object may acquire a fictional identity in the context of one pretence game (e.g., as a ‘car’) and another fictional identity in the context of a second pretence game (e.g., as a ‘horse’) (Bruell & Woolley, 1998; Gopnik & Slaughter, 1991; Hickling, Wellman, & Gottfried, 1997).

But do children at this age also understand these distinctions (between pretence and reality, and between different pretence games) in normative terms? With regard to the *pretence–reality*

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