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Young children enforce social norms selectively depending on the violator's group affiliation

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ABSTRACT

To become cooperative members of their cultural groups, developing children must follow their group's social norms. But young children are not just blind norm followers, they are also active norm enforcers, for example, protesting and correcting when someone plays a conventional game the "wrong" way. In two studies, we asked whether young children enforce social norms on all people equally, or only on ingroup members who presumably know and respect the norm. We looked at both moral norms involving harm and conventional game norms involving rule violations. Three-year-old children actively protested violation of moral norms equally for ingroup and outgroup individuals, but they enforced conventional game norms for ingroup members only. Despite their ingroup favoritism, young children nevertheless hold ingroup members to standards whose violation they tolerate from outsiders.

1. Introduction

Social norms are an integral part of all human societies and form the basis for human cooperation (Fehr & Fischbacher, 2004; Tomasello, 2009). Human adults routinely enforce social norms on members of their own cultural group – sometimes at great personal cost – and thereby foster ingroup conformity and cooperation.

Norm enforcement is widely believed to be within adults' area of responsibility, so preschoolers have long been considered as norm followers only (Piaget, 1932). Recently, however, researchers have documented that in addition to respecting social norms, young children enforce them on third parties as well. They protest game and moral norm violations and, at least with game norms, do so in many different contexts and try to alter the norm transgressor's behavior, for instance, by teaching the "right" way to do it (e.g., Rakoczy, Warneken, & Tomasello, 2008; Vaish, Missana, & Tomasello, 2011).

Two important questions about young children's norm enforcement have yet to be answered. The first is how young children, as norm enforcers, view the scope of social norms. In particular, does the norm transgressor's group affiliation (ingroup vs. outgroup) modulate children's norm enforcement, given that children are parochialists who favor members of their ingroup (Fehr, Bernhard, & Rockenbach, 2008; Nesdale & Flesser, 2001; Vaughan, Tajfel, & Williams, 1981). The second is whether, as norm enforcers, young children view the scope of different kinds of social norms differently? For example, do children enforce moral norms involving harm on all transgressors equally, but conventional, game-type norms only on ingroup members who could be expected to know and respect such conventions? Prior research using interview methods has not directly addressed these questions – especially not whether young children understand the normative force of social norms (a negative answer in an interview could be based, e.g., on personal dislike, and does not reveal whether the interviewee follows or enforces social norms) or the

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theoretically important comparison of ingroup and outgroup norm violators – and produced inconsistent results, with some studies finding that early school-aged children (6- to 7-year-olds) were intolerant of conventional norm transgressions even in outgroup members (e.g., Levy, Taylor, & Gelman, 1995; Song, Smetana, & Kim, 1987; Turiel, 1978).

In the current study, we investigated these two questions by presenting 3-year-old children with norm violations (committed by a puppet) in a real-life, naturalistic scenario, and giving them the opportunity to spontaneously protest or intervene. This novel, participatory methodology is particularly demanding, because the child must protest third-party, when she herself has not been harmed or directly affected in any way – and of course some children must overcome a natural shyness to intervene in this way. The experimental design was 2×2 (between-subjects). The first factor was the *norm violator's group affiliation*, so these violations were performed either by an *ingroup* puppet or by an *outgroup* puppet. The second factor was the *type of norm violation* presented: there were transgressions consisting of the destruction of another person's valued property (causing harm) which qualified them, according to many scholars, as *moral* norm transgressions that are non-arbitrary because they pertain to issues of well-being (Shweder, Much, Mahapatra, & Park, 1997; Turiel, 1983, 2002), and there were violations of arbitrary *game* norms (where a puppet played a game in a deviant, but equally possible, way) – norms that are usually considered paradigmatic cases of conventional norms that owe their existence to communal agreement and that are arbitrary in that they could have been different (Baker & Hacker, 1985; Lewis, 1969; Searle, 1995; Turiel, 1978). A follow-up experiment again focused on ingroup/outgroup game norm violations (see below for details).

Turiel and colleagues have drawn on a wealth of studies to argue that moral and conventional norms differ on a number of psychological dimensions; for instance, moral norms are viewed as authority-independent, general in scope, and their transgression is more serious than conventional violations (Smetana & Braeges, 1990; Turiel, 1983). Others have questioned the validity of this distinction (Kelly, Stich, Haley, Eng, & Fessler, 2007), stressed the importance of affective reactions, and proposed to draw the line between emotion-inducing and non-emotion-inducing transgressions (Haidt, Koller, & Dias, 1993; Nichols, 2002, 2004; Prinz, 2007). Whatever the resolution of this debate, in our study we violated norms that most adults would agree apply universally (against harming others for no reason; main experiment) and other norms that most adults would agree only apply to those who know and accept them (game rules; main and follow-up experiment).

As a baseline, we assessed children's tendency to intervene and protest when one of the puppets violated a non-arbitrary norm of instrumental rationality (prescribing the choice of the only effective means to a given end), in which case children should always intervene and help. At the end, we also asked children to choose one of the puppets in an affiliation test, and to allocate resources to the two puppets.

2. Main experiment

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants

Sixty-four monolingual 3-year-old children (age range = 40–44 months) participated in the study. The four

Table 1
Sequential overview of the experimental phases for each of the four between-subjects conditions.

Task/event	Game		Moral	
	Ingroup	Outgroup	Ingroup	Outgroup
1. Establishment of the ingroup–outgroup distinction	Ingroup puppet Max stays.	Ingroup puppet Max leaves. Outgroup puppet Henri appears and introduces himself.	Identical to game-ingroup condition	Identical to game-outgroup condition
2. Instrumental tasks	E1 models an instrumental action. Child may imitate. Respective puppet makes instrumental mistake.			
3. Target tasks	E1 models a game-like action. Child may imitate. Puppet (Max or Henri) performs an alternative action (game norm violation).		E1 creates something. Child may imitate. Puppet (Max or Henri) destroys E1's creation (moral norm violation).	
4. Establishment of the ingroup–outgroup distinction	Ingroup puppet Max leaves. Outgroup puppet Henri appears and introduces himself. Max reappears.	Max reappears.	Identical to game-ingroup condition	Identical to game-outgroup condition
5. Affiliation test	E1 prompts the child to decide which puppet (Max or Henri) should play with a dolphin toy the child had played with before.			
6. Resource allocation task	E1 prompts the child to allocate four identical stickers to the puppets.			

Note: Except for the supplemental tasks (affiliation test and resource allocation task), only one puppet was present at a time (operated by E2). During the respective puppet's actions in the instrumental/target tasks, E1 was turned away from the table to allow for spontaneous third-party intervention, and to make clear that E1 was not witnessing the norm violation.