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Young Children Enforce Social Norms

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Abstract

Social norms have played a key role in the evolution of human cooperation, serving to stabilize prosocial and egalitarian behavior despite the self-serving motives of individuals. Young children's behavior mostly conforms to social norms, as they follow adult behavioral directives and instructions. But it turns out that even preschool children also actively enforce social norms on others, often using generic normative language to do so. This behavior is not easily explained by individualistic motives; it is more likely a result of children's growing identification with their cultural group, which leads to prosocial motives for preserving its ways of doing things.

Keywords

young children, social norms, norm enforcement, social cognition, normativity, cooperation, conventionality

Human societies are organized very differently from those of other primates. Most prominently, human societies structure many of their activities via cooperative institutional arrangements, which are created by “agreement” for a common purpose and in which individuals play well-defined roles with prespecified rights and obligations. These range from relatively simple institutions, such as marriage, to highly complex institutions, such as the governments of modern industrialized nations.

The glue of human societies and their institutions is social norms, which seem to be unique to humans. That is to say, what holds these cooperative social arrangements together is individual humans' tendency to do things the way that others in the group do them—indeed, in the way they are *expected* by others in the group to do them (Chudek & Henrich, 2011). Social norms do not derive their binding power from brute physical force but rather from the mutual expectations within the social group to which each individual, at least implicitly, *agrees* to bind himself or herself—so that they apply generally to all who so agree.

Types of Social Norms

The prototypes of social norms are *moral norms*. As Nichols (2004) has argued, moral norms derive much of their normative influence on human behavior from the fact that, to some degree, they are in line with humans' natural aversion to harming others and natural attraction to helping others (see Warneken & Tomasello, 2009, for a review). Thus, with no other motivations in play, moral norms for helping others and against inflicting harm on others serve to reinforce already existing values. But what additional force is added by the norms?

That norms do indeed supply additional force is clear from the fact that people follow not only moral norms but also “arbitrary” *conventional norms* whose violation would involve no direct harm or victimization (Turiel, 1983)—norms concerning such things as the appropriate clothing for a funeral (but see Kelly, Stich, Haley, Eng, & Fessler, 2007, for a critique of the moral/conventional distinction). Our motivation to conform to conventional norms stems at least partly from not wanting to be disapproved of, or punished, by others. But it also stems partly from our desire to belong (to the group), and to conform and do things the “right” way. Preschool children already know the difference between a statistical norm (e.g., people don't wear blue jeans to bed) and a true social norm (e.g., people don't wear blue jeans to funerals), and in new situations they want to know such things as “Where do we hang our coats?” and “Where should I sit?” (Kalish, 1998; Kalish & Cornelius, 2007).

There is a less-noted, specific type of conventional norm that works somewhat differently. Whereas moral norms and many conventional norms regulate already existing activities (typically in cooperative ways), *constitutive norms* to some degree actually create new social realities, typically in the form of “X counts as Y in context C” (Searle, 1995). For example, although individuals mate and have children in any case, the institution of marriage creates institutional roles with deontic powers. Thus, a father legitimated by the institution of

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marriage is empowered by society to make life-and-death decisions for his children. Police legitimated by the “consent of the governed”—a political notion advocated by the philosophers John Locke (1690/1988) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1762/1997)—are entitled to do all kinds of things that would not be tolerated if they were done by private individuals.

Particularly clear cases of constitutive norms are provided by rule games, in which violating a norm—for example, moving a pawn backward in a game of chess—is not just failing to follow a convention (though it is that) but is not playing the game “we” agreed upon at all. Wearing a tattered T-shirt to a funeral is reprehensible, but moving a pawn backward in the game of chess is simply not playing chess.

Children’s Understanding and Enforcement of Social Norms

The vast majority of work on social norms in children has focused on moral and, to a lesser degree, conventional norms and on the question of why young children respect and follow them. Piaget (1932) noted that children initially follow moral norms out of respect for the authority of adults and older children. However, in the same book, Piaget also reported studies of Swiss children’s application and understanding of rules in games of marbles, arguing that regardless of whether the rules of marbles strike adults as “moral,” they instantiate the fundamental process of rule acquisition and following: “The rules of the game of marbles are handed down, just like so-called moral realities, from one generation to another, and are preserved solely by the respect that is felt for them by individuals” (p. 2). However, as children become older (by about 7 to 12 years of age), their respect for the rules of the game is derived less from authority and more from the fact that they have autonomously agreed to abide by them; thus, there is a kind of reciprocity and mutual respect among players (this is what evolutionists often call *contingent reciprocity*: I agree to cooperate if everyone else does also).

Recently, we have been engaged in a line of research focused on children’s understanding of the norms governing simple rule games. Our question is at what point young children stop thinking of games’ rules as immutable dictates handed down from powerful authorities and begin thinking of them as something like agreements into which they have entered. To investigate this question, we have focused on a novel aspect of the ontogeny of social norms. Beginning at around 3 years of age, young children do not just follow social norms but actively enforce them on others—even from a third-party stance, in situations in which they themselves are not directly involved or affected (see Fig. 1 for an example). Although there are many prudential reasons for following social norms, it is not immediately clear why a 3-year-old child should feel compelled to actually enforce them on others. Such group-oriented behavior opens the possibility that young children are not merely driven by individualistic motives but that, from early on, they start to identify with their



Fig. 1. Example of children’s enforcement of constitutive norms: A child wags his finger and protests against a hand puppet who is violating the rules of a simple game.

cultural group, which leads to prosocial motives for preserving the group’s ways of doing things.

The first study was reported by Rakoczy, Warneken, and Tomasello (2008). In this study, 2- and 3-year-old children watched as a puppet announced that she would now “dax.” But then she performed a different action than the one the children had previously seen an adult performing and calling “daxing.” Many children objected in some way (whereas they did not object if the puppet performed the same action without calling it “daxing”); importantly, in doing so, the 3-year-olds reliably used normative language such as “It doesn’t work like that. You have to do it like this.” These utterances demonstrated that the children were not just objecting to the puppet’s actions because they personally did not like them or because they objected to the puppet as an individual, but rather because what the puppet was doing not the way the action *should* be performed by anyone (a generic, normative assessment). And they were not just objecting to the fact that the puppet did not perform the action she said she would: Rakoczy, Brosche, Warneken, and Tomasello (2009) obtained the same results with a nonverbal indication of the game context (i.e., indication that an action X is appropriate when performed on this table, but not when performed on that table).

It is worth noting that the rule games involved in these studies were solitary activities; playing them incorrectly did not disrupt the game for any other players. So why did children object and correct the puppet? Why should children care about deviations from norms if no one is harmed by them? We do not know the answer to this question, but in two recent studies, children of about the same age behaved very similarly—they objected, using normative language—when a puppet violated

a moral norm against harm (i.e., by destroying another person's picture; Vaish, Missana, & Tomasello, 2011) or a norm against infringements on property rights (Rossano, Rakoczy, & Tomasello, 2011). Children's reactions to violations of rule games thus appear to be quite similar, both quantitatively and qualitatively, to their reactions to violations of moral norms that cause actual harm—which is a bit puzzling. Critically, however, children do differentiate these two types of norms: Schmidt, Rakoczy, and Tomasello (in press) found that whereas young children enforce moral norms equally on all violators, they enforce game norms only on members of their own cultural in-group (e.g., people who speak the same language)—presumably because only “we” fall within the scope of the norm and can be expected to respect it.

Another key question is where the generality of these norms comes from. Csibra and Gergely (2009) have hypothesized that natural pedagogy is an evolved cognitive system whereby children, when they recognize that they are being taught something, automatically jump to the conclusion that it is generic information about the way things work (instead of nongeneralizable information about specific things, e.g., personal preferences). In the studies concerning children's game rules, an adult always explicitly taught the children how the game was played. However, in a recent study by Schmidt, Rakoczy, and Tomasello (2011), there was no pedagogy (or adult normative language) involved. Nevertheless, when 3-year-old children saw a puppet interact with a novel artifact in a way that differed from the way they had just seen an adult interacting with it (she immediately recognized it and acted on it confidently), they again corrected the wayward puppet, again quite often using normative language, which they did not do if the adult had previously interacted with the artifact in only an exploratory way, as if it were novel for her. Young children thus do not need explicit instructions or communication from adults (which is indeed less common in traditional societies; Lancy, 1996), or any other kind of special marking from adults, to see an action as socially normative; they just need to see that adults apparently expect things to work a certain way (see Casler, Terziyan, & Greene, 2009, for observations of children protesting against third parties for using artifacts in nonconventional ways).

It is difficult to interpret these findings as being compatible with the idea that children see game rules and other constitutive norms as somehow essentialistic (i.e., unalterable and immutable) features of the external world. They apply them only in appropriate contexts and only to the appropriate social group (and can apply them without adult teaching). Another line of research has undermined the essentialistic interpretation even further. Rakoczy (2008) and Wyman, Rakoczy, and Tomasello (2009) looked at children's understanding of constitutive norms used in the special context of games of pretense. Three-year-old children again objected—in much the same way as in the other studies involving game rules—when a puppet used a wooden block as a pretend sandwich, because the child and an adult had previously designated this block as

pretend soap (“No, you can't eat that. It's soap!”). When the same block was later designated as a sandwich in a different game, children objected if it was used as soap.

These studies demonstrate with special clarity that young children can, at least in pretense, understand that the way a game is played is, in a sense, an “agreement” that can be changed, not something written in stone. In addition, it is worth noting that this ability to socially designate a wooden block as a sandwich—and then treat it as such in subsequent actions—may be seen as a forerunner of humans' astounding ability to accord to otherwise unremarkable objects and people special cultural statuses (e.g., paper as money and persons as presidents) based only on “agreement” (Searle, 1995). Pretend play of this type may thus be seen as the cradle of humans' understanding of institutional reality (Rakoczy & Tomasello, 2007).

Social Norms as Shared Intentionality

Everyone knows that children follow social norms, but they also, from about 3 years of age, enforce them. One could already argue from this basic fact that children do not view social norms as part of the essential structure of external reality, in which case they would not need enforcing by mere mortals. So it is possible that children are not really enforcing social norms after all but only mimicking their parents—but that merely pushes the question back to why the parents are enforcing them in the first place. Imitation has to stop somewhere, so it does not help us with the question of origins. Moreover, in the modern understanding of social learning, children imitate only what they in some sense understand (e.g., Tomasello, Kruger, & Ratner, 1993). If children see a parent enforcing a norm, and if they then want to do the “same thing” in a novel context, they must understand what the adult is objecting to—not a specific behavior but rather the violation of a norm—which implies some understanding of norms.

Instead, we think that the experimental findings suggest something like the following explanation. When children begin to identify with their cultural group—which more and more research is showing happens at a very young age, based on such things as linguistic accent and common clothing (e.g., Kinzler, Dupoux, & Spelke, 2007)—they understand that part of this group identification is that “we” do things in certain ways. Gilbert (1989) argued that when someone wants to be a member of a group, they, in essence, jointly accept the social norms that the members of the group commit themselves to, which naturally includes upholding the norms when others in the group violate them (see Gräfenhain, Behne, Carpenter, & Tomasello, 2009). And so, our proposal is that enforcing norms is an integral part of becoming a member of a cultural group, given individuals' evolved skills and motivations for shared intentionality and group identification (Tomasello, Carpenter, Call, Behne, & Moll, 2005; Tomasello, Melis, Tennie, Wyman, & Herrmann, in press). Later in development, these same skills and motivations enable children to participate more fully in, and perhaps even contribute to, the institutional reality of their culture.

The evolution of human cooperation has been made possible by people's tendency both to follow social norms and also to enforce them—and, indeed, to regulate individual behavior by internalizing group norms and applying them to the self in acts of guilt and shame (Boyd & Richerson, 2006). People may follow social norms for external reasons (e.g., to avoid sanctions), but people's enforcement of social norms suggests some kind of prosocial motivation toward, or identification with, their group and its lifeways, and a motivation to preserve them—a kind of group-mindedness. The fact that young children enforce social norms suggests that they are already participating in this collective intentionality.

Recommended Reading

- Boyd, R., & Richerson, P. J. (2006). (See References). A theoretical account of how cultural evolution paved the way for the adaptiveness of social instincts.
- Piaget, J. (1932). (See References). A historical classic that started the investigation of young children's understanding of social norms.
- Rakoczy, H., Warneken, F., & Tomasello, M. (2008). (See References). A paper presenting the first studies to investigate young children's understanding of social norms (via norm enforcement), using the new methodology of spontaneous protest.
- Searle, J. R. (1995). (See References). A philosophical account of the ontology of social facts and institutions such as social norms.
- Tomasello, M., Carpenter, M., Call, J., Behne, T., & Moll, H. (2005). (See References). A theoretical account of how skills and motivations for shared intentionality manifest themselves during human development.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no conflict of interest with respect to the authorship or the publication of this article.

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