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Cognitive Development

Young children think you can opt out of social-conventional but not moral practices

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ABSTRACT

Social-conventional but not moral norms bring with them the possibility of "opting-out" of the practice in question. The current study investigated preschoolers' understanding of this special form of context-relativity: the norms' validity upon the agent's intention to engage in the respective activity. Forty-eight 3-year-olds saw a (puppet) agent act in accordance with or against a conventional or moral rule after announcing either to be part or to opt out of the activity. Children's normative responses indicated a sophisticated understanding of the possibility to opt out of the norm-regulated activity. When confronted with a moral situation, children judged a norm-violating behavior independently of the agent's announcement to be or not be part of the activity. In the social-conventional context, however, children judged the agent's actions against the standards of her intention, protesting a norm violation less after the announcement to opt out of the activity.

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1. Introduction

Social norms form an indispensable part of our everyday life, regulating our interpersonal interactions and laying the foundations for our societal practices and institutions. Within the class of social norms, the most common distinction drawn in psychology and philosophy is between moral and social-conventional norms (e.g., Turiel, 1983). According to Social Domain Theory, moral norms are rules concerning issues such as personal welfare, justice and harm, while social-conventional norms are arbitrary rules about the correct or appropriate behavior in a given situation or social practice (Smetana, 2006).¹

In a long-standing tradition, numerous studies have shown that already young children distinguish moral and conventional norms on different dimensions (e.g., Smetana, 1983, 1984; Smetana et al., 2012). From three years of age, they judge moral norm transgressions as more severe (Smetana, 1981) and less dependent on rules or authorities (Smetana & Braeges, 1990). Another crucial difference between the two kinds of norms is their degree of context-relativity: while moral norms are generally seen as universal, social-conventional norms are considered to be sensitive to situational circumstances. This kind of context-relativity comes in different forms. The one mostly studied so far concerns spatial contexts: an action (e.g., wearing your pajamas) may constitute a social-conventional mistake in one location (e.g., in school) but may be perfectly

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¹ Note that, however, there is a big theoretical debate on whether this distinction is really best represented by different domains as proposed by Social Domain Theory (Turiel, 1983) or whether the psychological distinction is better drawn by norms with and without feelings as suggested by sentimentalist accounts (Kelly, Stich, Haley, Eng, & Fessler, 2007; Nichols, 2002).

appropriate in a different location (e.g., at home). Recent research has shown that already 3-year-olds demonstrate a sensitivity to such spatial context-relativity of conventional norms (Rakoczy, Brosche, Warneken, & Tomasello, 2009; Smetana et al., 2012; Wyman, Rakoczy, & Tomasello, 2009). Context-relativity can also be defined as a function of culture, with prototypical moral transgressions being considered universally wrong in all cultures while conventions might be seen to vary between cultures. Recent research has shown that, again, already 3-year-olds are sensitive to this dimension (Schmidt, Rakoczy, & Tomasello, 2012).

One question, that has not been addressed so far, is whether young children also understand more complex forms of context-relativity. In particular, whether a given social norm holds can vary relative to the agent's intentions (to be or not be part of an activity or practice governed by this norm). We know from a growing body of evidence that preschoolers are sensitive to the perceived intentionality of the actor when asked to evaluate moral transgressions. They distinguish between accidental and intentional actions such that accidental mistakes are generally judged as less bad and deserving of less punishment (e.g., Baird & Astington, 2004; Killen, Lynn Mulvey, Richardson, Jampol, & Woodward, 2011; Yuill & Perner, 1988). Even more, they weigh mental state information differently depending on the kind of norm (moral vs. conventional) that was violated. When confronted with a physically constrained agent, children stopped criticizing and protesting the agent for an unintended moral mistake but still criticized the equivalent conventional one (Josephs, Kushnir, Gräfenhain, & Rakoczy, 2016). However, the kind of intentionality that is important when it comes to context-relativity, namely the contingency of the validity of different types of norms on the agent's intentionality, is of a different structure and complexity: do children understand that an agent's being subject to a given norm may be a function of her intention to participate in the given activity?

From a theoretical point of view, due to their relation with welfare and harm moral norms should be seen as unconditionally binding (constituting categorical imperatives, as philosophers have called them (Foot, 1972; Kant, 1785/1965): action prescriptions that hold irrespective of the agent's motivational set). Social-conventional norms, in contrast, due to their arbitrariness, should be seen as context-relative in the sense of being valid under the condition that the agent intends to be part of the practice in question. Social-conventional norms should thus offer the option of opting out under the right circumstances. No such option, in contrast, should be present in the case of moral norms. In fact, the intention to opt out of a moral practice is criticizable itself. Imagine someone announcing that she does not want to respect any other person's welfare, rights of well-being today, but rather prefers to harm others. First, this announcement itself gives sufficient reason for intervention. Second, if the person then actually fulfills her immoral intentions and harms somebody, her behavior is judged against the standards not of her intention "to harm others", but against moral standards and is thus seen as wrong, independently of the agent's prior announcement. When it comes to social-conventional norms, however, the validity of the norm depends on the person's commitment to be part of the norm. For the agent, this opens up the option of "opting out" of the normative scope of this very kind of activity. Imagine someone doing a Sudoku but then announcing she does not want to play Sudoku anymore, but would rather just paint the boxes in different colors. First of all, this announcement is not criticizable per se. Second, the subsequent action is now judged against the standard of the previous announcement and not against the standard of the norm of Sudoku. The very same action (painting the boxes in different colors) is thus less criticizable after the announcement to not play Sudoku than in a situation where the person announced to play Sudoku. In the latter situation the appropriate response would be to tell the agent "No, that's not how Sudoku goes. In Sudoku you have to write the correct numbers in the boxes", whereas in the former situation such a statement would be oddly misplaced.

Moral and social-conventional norms thus also differ in the possibility of opting out of the respective activity and context. While it is to some extent up to the agent to take part in social-conventional activities and thus either subject herself to the norms in questions or to opt out of the activities, it is not up to the agent in comparable ways whether she is subject to a moral norm. Empirical evidence from children concerning the evaluation of actions based on preceding commitments (to be part of a norm-governed activity or practice) is still rare. One study has investigated whether 6- to 10-year-olds' evaluation of a person "eating meat" differed as a function of the person's (reasons for the) commitment to be a vegetarian (Hussar & Harris, 2009). Results indicated that only if the person was a morally committed vegetarian, children blamed her for meat eating; however, meat eating was judged as "okay" if the person had no previous commitment to vegetarianism (or a merely non-moral commitment). Consequently, the person's choice for the very same action (eating meat) was judged against different standards as a function of the person's background commitments. This study thus presents first evidence for children's appreciation of the differential validity of moral norms relative to the agent's intention to engage in the respective activity. What it leaves open, though, is the question whether children consider such contingency of norm validity upon the agent's commitment to hold differentially in the cases of moral versus social-conventional norms. Furthermore, the children tested in this study, due to the complexity of the norms' contents (forms of vegetarianism) were rather old. When addressing the basic question what children understand about potential differences in the logical structures of different types of norms, it would be desirable to investigate children at the earliest ages at which a basic differentiation of types of norms has been documented (i.e. around age 3).

The rationale of the current study was thus the following: we investigated whether young children understand that moral and social-conventional norms differ in the degree to which they are context-relative vis-à-vis the agent's intention to be subject to the norm, and understand that social-conventional, but not moral norms, bring with them the possibility to "opt out" of the norm related activities. This study goes beyond existing research in several ways.

First, we systematically investigate paradigmatic examples of moral and social-conventional contexts to test whether children understand the structural differences between the two kinds of norms. Second, instead of giving children hypothetical scenarios with explicit questions, we apply a more action-based methodology suitable for testing even younger children than in previous studies. Recent research using children's spontaneous normative responses such as protest as dependent measure has uncovered sophisticated and quite flexible forms of norm-understanding already in 2–3 year-olds children (Josephs et al., 2016; Rakoczy, Warneken, & Tomasello, 2008; Schmidt et al., 2012).

Children were confronted with scenarios in which a (puppet) agent acted in accordance with or against a conventional or moral rule. The crucial manipulation was the agent's announcement preceding her actions: she either announced to be part of an activity defined by moral/conventional rules or to opt out of this very activity. Children's spontaneous normative reactions such as protest and critique in response to the puppet's actions were coded as dependent variable. The logic here is the following: *if* children understand the structural differences in context-relativity between moral and social-conventional practices *then* they should (1) criticize the announcement to opt out in the moral but not in the conventional condition and (2) protest against the subsequent action as a function of the agent's previous announcement in the social-conventional situation; that is, children should criticize an action that deviates from a conventional norm only when the agent had announced to take part in the activity involving this norm, but not when the agent had opted out of this activity. In the moral situations, in contrast, children should protest against the agent's actions that deviate from a moral norm independently of the agent's previous announcement to participate in or opt out of an activity involving the moral norms in question.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The final sample consisted of forty-eight 3-year olds (36–47 months), twenty-four participated in the conventional (mean age = 40.7 months, 13 girls) and twenty-four in the moral condition (mean age = 42.9 months, 16 girls). Four additional children were tested but excluded from the final sample due to technical or experimental errors (two children), mother's interference (one child) or because they were uncooperative (one child). All children were from mixed socioeconomic backgrounds and mostly from Caucasian ethnicity. They were recruited from a local database of parents, who had volunteered to participate in developmental studies.

2.2. Design, material and procedure

After being randomly assigned to either the moral or the conventional condition each child witnessed two blocks consisting of three types of events, leading to a total of six trials. The order of the types of events was counterbalanced across children.

The procedure consisted of a warm-up and the test trials. In the warm-up, the first experimenter (E1) introduced the child to a hand puppet ('Bilbo', operated by a second experimenter). To familiarize the child with the puppet and situations where they could intervene, E1, Bilbo and the child played two puzzle games in which Bilbo sometimes misplaced a puzzle piece and the child was encouraged to help Bilbo fix the problem. This familiarization phase was included to make the child as comfortable as possible to react to Bilbo's actions.

After the warm-up one of two test blocks started (paper or clay, order counterbalanced across children). Each of the blocks followed a similar pattern: a phase in which the stage was set was followed by the critical test situation.

For the paper test block the procedure looked as follows (see Table 1 for a systematic structure of the set up). In the conventional condition, a simple rule game ('daxing') was introduced: red pieces of paper where supposed to be folded and put in Box 1, yellow pieces of paper where supposed to be ripped apart and then put in Box 2. When it was Bilbo's turn he received three red pieces of paper.

In the moral condition, E1, Bilbo and the child each painted pictures. E1 always completed three pictures. After the painting phase, E1 said they had to clean up the table and put Bilbo's and the child's pictures in Box 1. She then ripped apart scratch paper and put it in the garbage can. It was Bilbo's turn to clean up the rest of the table, consisting of the three pictures painted by E1. In both conditions, Bilbo then performed three types of actions:

- *A+A+*: he announced he wanted to be part of the activity (positive announcement A+) and put the picture/red paper in Box 1 (positive action A+).
- A+A-: he announced he wanted to be part of the activity (positive announcement A+) and ripped apart the picture/red paper and put it in the garbage can/Box 2 (negative action A-).
- A-A-: he announced that he did not want to be part of the activity anymore, he would rather do something else, he wanted to make snippets out of the picture/red paper (negative announcement A-) and ripped apart the picture/red paper and put it in the garbage can/Box 2 (negative action A-).

Note that, while the critical action always consisted of two parts, i.e. first doing something with the paper and second putting it in either of the two boxes, the critical negative announcement A– only referred to the first part of the action, leaving open where to put the paper. During Bilbo's trials, E1 turned away, pretending to be busy with doing something else.

The clay test block followed the same structure. In the conventional condition, the game went as follows: blue clay balls were supposed to be formed into discs and stacked on the table, while yellow clay balls were supposed to be put in a box. In

Table 1

Schematic overview of the structure of the conventional and moral conditions.



the moral condition, E1, Bilbo, and the child each made clay sculptures. Bilbo's announcements and actions were modelled analogously to the paper test block.

2.3. Observational and coding procedure

All sessions were coded by a single observer from videotape. A second independent coder coded a random sample of 20% of all sessions for reliability. Inter-rater agreement was excellent (weighted κ = 0.875). For coding, the child's response phase was sub-divided in two phases. The announcement phase started after the puppet's announcement and ended with the beginning of the action. The action phase followed the announcement phase and lasted until the end of the trial (10 s).

Children's spontaneous responses to the puppet's behavior in each of the phases were first described with a verbatim transcription of their utterances. A given expression was coded as protest when the child showed clear normative criticism ("No, you did it wrong!"), correction ("No, you have to do it like this!") or showed in an implicit way that she judged the action as wrong by uttering an imperative ("Put it here!"), a clear complaint in a disapproving tone about the given action ("No, he put it in the yellow one!") or a rejection ("No!").² Protest could be uttered towards the puppet agent directly ("No, you have to ...!") or indirectly to E1 ("Look, she's doing it wrongly!"). Following previous work (e.g., Rakoczy et al., 2008) for each trial, it was then determined whether the child showed protest or not. For statistical analysis sum scores (0–2) of protest for each type of event were computed. In the sum scores a "0" indicated no protest in this condition, "1" indicated protest in one of the trials of this condition and "2" protest in both trials of the condition (meaning in the clay and the paper condition).³ Separate sum scores were computed for the announcement phase and the action phase.

In addition to whether children protested at all, we coded whether the protest in the action phase was directed at the first or the second part of the action. Recall that critical actions always consisted of two parts: e.g., (1) ripping apart the piece

² Note that, rejections do not represent a less appropriate way to express disagreement with the performed action per se. For example, saying "No!" after the puppet said she just daxed, is a nearly perfect answer, leading no questions open that the child disagrees that the performed action was "correct daxing".

³ There was one missing value (in this trial, the child prevented the puppet from completing the action and thus we could not code any responses by the child to this (non-existent) action). We substituted this missing value with the general probability (relative to the whole sample) for protest in a trial in order to be able to compute a valid sum score.



Fig. 1. Mean sum scores (0-2) of protest in (a) the announcement phase and (b) the action phase of the test trials. Note. A+A+ = positive announcement A+ and positive action A+, A+A = positive announcement A+ and negative action A-, A-A = negative announcement A- and negative action A-. * p < 0.05, n.s. = non-significant.

of paper and (2) putting pieces in box. As for the general protest we then conducted separate sum scores (0-2) for the first and the second part of the action across the two trials per conditions.

3. Results

3.1. Analysis plan

Derived from the theoretical background, the focus of interest here was the relative pattern of responses to the different conditions (A+A+/A+A-/A-A-) within a certain type of norm. In particular, we expected a difference in the amount of protest between condition A-A- (negative announcement/negative action) and A+A- (positive announcement/negative action) in the conventional but not the moral condition. Consequently, for these planned comparisons we conducted dependent (2-tailed) *t*-tests (for a similar logic, see e.g., Schmidt et al., 2012).

3.2. Announcement phase

With respect to children's protest behavior in the first response phase, i.e. before the puppet's action (see Fig. 1a), in the moral condition children spontaneously protested more in condition A-A-(M=0.38, SD=0.71) than in any other condition (A+A-: M=0.04, SD=0.20, t(23)=2.56, p=0.02, r=0.47; A+A+: M=0.00, SD=0.00, t(23)=2.58, p=0.02, r=0.47). There was almost no protest in the first phase in the conventional condition, the amount of protest did not differ at all between conditions (A-A-/A+A-: t(23)=0.44 p=0.66, r=0.09; A-A-/A+A+: t(23)=1.00, p=0.33, r=0.20).

3.3. Action phase

In the second phase, i.e. after the puppet started acting (see Fig. 1b), in the moral condition, children protested equally in condition A+A-(M=0.71, SD=0.75) and A-A-(M=0.54, SD=0.72; t(23)=1.07, p=0.30, r=0.22). Both of these conditions differed from condition A+A+(M=0.04, SD=0.20; A+A+/A+A-: t(23)=4.29, p<0.01, r=0.67; A+A+/A-A-: t(23)=3.14, p<0.01, r=0.55). In the conventional condition a linear trend between the conditions A+A-(M=0.54, SD=0.67; t(23)=2.18, p=0.04, r=0.41) and more in condition A-A-(M=0.92, SD=0.88) than in condition A-A-(M=0.55, SD=0.67; t(23)=2.18, p=0.04, r=0.41) and more in condition A-A- than in condition A+A+(M=0.08, SD=0.28, t(23)=3.14, p<0.01, r=0.55).

3.3.1. Supplementary analysis: target of protest in the A–A– condition

In a supplementary more qualitative analysis, we investigated more closely the target of protest in the action phase in the A–A– (negative announcement/negative action) condition: if protest occurred, was it directed at the first part of the action (e.g., ripping apart the paper/picture) or the second part (e.g., putting the paper in Box 2/the garbage can)? This more detailed coding provides particularly valuable information in the critical condition A–A–, where the puppet announced to make snippets out of the picture/paper. If children protest against the performance of this announced first part of the action, this is a strong indicator for disagreement with the action per se. Protest directed against the unannounced second part of the action, however, is more an indicator for disagreement with the discontinuity in the sequence of actions (e.g. children might think that the color and not the form (i.e., snippets or folded) of the paper indicates it's correct location such that red paper always goes in Box 1, independent of what one has done to it in the first place).

This analysis revealed that in the moral condition children's protest in condition A-A- (negative action/negative announcement) was directed exclusively against the announced first part of the action (first part: M = 0.33, SD = 0.70, second

part: M = 0.00, SD = 0.00; t(23) = 2.33, p = 0.03, r = 0.44). In the conventional condition, children tended to target their protest the other way around, with some protest against the second part of action (M = 0.21, SD = 0.42), but hardly any against the first part (M = 0.08, SD = 0.28; t(23) = 1.14, p = 0.27, r = 0.23).

4. Discussion

The main aim of the present study was to explore the sophistication of young children's early norm understanding. In order to test for children's grasp of the different degrees of context-relativity of moral and social-conventional norms, we presented them with an agent acting in accordance or against a moral/conventional rule after announcing to either be or not to be part of the relevant activity.

Three critical indicators of children's early understanding of the contingency of the validity of norms on the agent's intentions and thus of the possibility of opting out were investigated. First, we analyzed children's reactions to the announcement not to be a part of the respective activity anymore. Children protested against this announcement only in the moral but not in the conventional condition. Second, we analyzed children's protest in response to an action that deviated from a norm contingently upon the agent's previous announcement. The results indicate that children judged the norm-deviating action independently of the agent's previous announcement in the moral condition (mistakes were protested equally after the agent's announcement to be/not to be part of the relevant activity) whereas they judged the action against the standard of what the agent announced to do in the conventional condition (protesting a norm-deviating action less if it fitted the announcement). Third, we analyzed the direction of the protest, i.e. whether children's protest in the critical condition was directed towards the announced or the unannounced part of the action. Here, a difference was found between moral and social-conventional activities such that in the moral condition children still protested against exactly the same part of the action that was previously announced, while in the conventional condition children's protest was also directed towards the unannounced part. This behavior indicates that children disagree with an immoral action per se, while for the socialconventional activities, they also grasp that one is not totally free in the use of the material designated for this very kind of action. It is as if they were saying: "It is totally fine to not wanting to play our game, but if you do something else you should not make use of our game material".

These results taken together have important implications. First of all, they show that young children's early understanding of the context-relativity of different kinds of social norms is even more sophisticated and occurs even earlier than previously assumed. While a large body of research, mostly conducted in the tradition of the Social Domain Theory, has previously shown that preschoolers understand that the validity of social-conventional norms can vary spatially and culturally (Schmidt et al., 2012; Smetana & Braeges, 1990; Smetana et al., 2012), an understanding of the commitment to these norms has only been studied in an indirect way and at school age (Hussar & Harris, 2009). Consequently, the present study is the first to show that already 3-year-olds understand context-relativity as a function of the intentional context such that the agent's being subject to social-conventional norms is a function of her intention to participate in the given activity.

How do the present findings relate to previous work on how the perceived intentionality of an action plays into its normative evaluation vis-à-vis moral versus conventional standards? One recent study, in particular, investigated how the intentional status of an action - whether the agent did or did not intend a normatively relevant outcome-is included in different normative judgments. In line with adult intuitions, the main finding was that for preschoolers the intention behind the action itself was more important when evaluating moral compared to conventional transgressions (Josephs et al., 2016). In contrast, the question of the present study focused on the differences in context-relativity between moral and conventional norms as a function of the agent's intention to be part of the norm-regulated activity. Importantly, in this study the action itself as well as the outcome were always intended, with the crucial manipulation applying at an earlier stage, concerning the intention to join the activity in the first place. Again, in line with theoretical predictions, the existing results show that this special form of intentionality is considered more strongly in conventional than in moral situations. Thus, prima facie the two patterns of results (more protest in response to conventional compared to moral transgressions when they were unintended in the previous study; more protest towards moral than conventional transgressions when the agent had previously announced not to be subject to the practice in question in the present study) may seem to be in conflict with each other. However, on closer analysis, they turn out to be perfectly consistent, reflecting children's appreciation of the fundamentally different intentional structures in the two studies. Taken together, thus, the two sets of findings suggest the following picture: children think you are relatively free to join conventional practices whereas moral practices have more unconditional demand. Once you are in the scope of a given practice, though, you are subject to its standards, and in the evaluation of a given act against those standards, the underlying intentionality may play a lesser role in conventional compared to moral practices.

Furthermore, the present findings speak against more deflationary/parsimonious accounts of early norm understanding. Such accounts claim that early protest is based on simple matching heuristics, such as "If there is a mismatch between statement and action, protest!" rather than a real understanding of the respective norms (e.g., Brandl, Esken, Priewasser, & Rafetseder, in press; Brinck, 2014). However, children in the present study clearly went beyond such simple heuristics. They did not only look for matches and mismatches between the announcement and the action but rather used the information given by the announcement differentially between the two kinds of norms to place their subsequent protest. Further, in the moral condition, it was not only the amount of protest that speaks against the use of such a simple heuristic but also the content of the protest, the target of the protest matching exactly the topic of the announcement. Consequently, even

In the current study, we used protest as a dependent variable that is particularly suitable for uncovering early norm understanding. It is an interesting question for future research how the practical judgments-in-action expressed in protest, critique etc. relate to children's explicit judgments in response to test questions (such as "did she make a mistake?") when it comes to appreciating context-relativity.⁴

In the present study, we used prototypical moral and social-conventional norms (harming vs. game rules) to investigate whether indicators for an understanding of context-relativity occur in young children in the first place. However, in light of recent debates about the status of the moral/conventional distinction (above all, whether it is a psychologically primitive distinction, or is actually based on some other, more fundamental distinction between, e.g., norms with and without feelings; see Nichols, 2002) future research should focus more systematically on a broader range of cases. Two cases here are of particular interest. First, it would be interesting to test less clear moral transgressions. Previous studies have already shown that the proposed context-sensitivity concerning ingroup/outgroup distinctions, originally thought to be specific to social-conventional norms, extends to certain moral transgressions such as teasing (Rhodes & Chalik, 2013). Young and Saxe (2011) also showed that the role of intentions differs between different kinds of moral domains. Future research should consequently extend the present harm case to other moral situations such as justice. Second, it would be interesting to investigate less clear conventional cases, where e.g., conventional norms have moral implications (e.g., dress code at a funeral), to pinpoint the limits of opting out even in social-conventional situations.

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⁴ See Keupp, Behne, and Rakoczy (2013) for a first approach that directly related protest and explicit judgments. This study suggests that the two measures converge nicely from around age 5, with protest being more sensitive beforehand.

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