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## Group presence, category labels, and generic statements influence children to treat descriptive group regularities as prescriptive



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### ABSTRACT

Children use descriptive regularities of social groups (what *is*) to generate prescriptive judgments (what *should be*). We examined whether this tendency held when the regularities were introduced through group presence, category labels, or generic statements. Children (ages 4–9 years,  $N = 203$ ) were randomly assigned to one of four conditions that manipulated how descriptive group regularities were presented: group presence (e.g., “These ones [a group of three individuals] eat this kind of berry”), category labels (e.g., “This [individual] Hibble eats this kind of berry”), generic statements (e.g., [showing an individual] “Hibbles eat this kind of berry”), or control (e.g., “This one [individual] eats this kind of berry”). Then, children saw conforming and non-conforming individuals and were asked to evaluate their behavior. As predicted, children evaluated non-conformity negatively in all conditions except the control condition. Together, these results suggest that minimal perceptual and linguistic cues provoke children to treat social groups as having normative force.

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### Introduction

Children readily adopt a normative stance (Rakoczy & Schmidt, 2013). They interpret another person’s behavior as normative (e.g., “That is how one *should* do that”) even in non-normative contexts

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(Schmidt, Rakoczy, & Tomasello, 2011) and even after seeing the behavior only once (Schmidt, Butler, Heinz, & Tomasello, 2016). When children observe a tool being used in a certain way, they rigidly imitate the behavior, expect others to do so as well, and protest when the tool is used differently (e.g., “You *must* do this”; Kenward, 2012). Similarly, when children learn the rules of a game and subsequently observe someone violate those rules, they respond with protest and critique (e.g., “You *can’t* do that”; Rakoczy, Hamann, Warneken, & Tomasello, 2010; Rakoczy & Schmidt, 2013). Indeed, children’s sensitivity to norms is central to their social cognition; it tells them what kind of behaviors to expect from others (e.g., children expect group members to share properties; Kalish, 2012), guides their own behavior (e.g., children spontaneously create their own norms and teach them to others; Göckeritz, Schmidt, & Tomasello, 2014), shapes how they evaluate and respond to norm violators (e.g., they critique norm violators and are annoyed by them; Cooley & Killen, 2015; Hardecker, Schmidt, Roden, & Tomasello, 2016), and in some cases can even influence them to act antisocially (e.g., if their group members do not share, they might not share either; Engelmann, Herrmann, Rapp, & Tomasello, 2016).

Recently, Roberts, Gelman, and Ho (2016) found that children use descriptive group regularities (what *is*) to make prescriptive judgments (what *should be*). They introduced children (ages 4–13 years) to two novel groups, Hibbles and Glerks, that engaged in morally neutral behaviors (e.g., spoke a certain language, ate a certain food) and then to a series of conforming or non-conforming individuals. Children, especially the youngest (4- to 6-year-olds), evaluated non-conforming individuals negatively (e.g., if Hibbles listen to a certain kind of music or speak a certain language, then it was bad for an individual Hibble to listen to a different kind of music or speak a different language). They also found that children’s responses were robust across intergroup contexts (i.e., children disapproved of non-conformity regardless of whether the novel groups were portrayed as cooperating with or competing against each other. This research provided a strong test of the power of norms; the groups were unfamiliar, the behaviors were morally neutral, and children did not belong to the groups—all factors that have been previously demonstrated to license prescriptive judgments (e.g., Abrams, Rutland, & Cameron, 2003; Blakemore, 2003; Liben, Bigler, & Krogh, 2001; Mulvey, 2016; Smetana et al., 2012)—yet children nonetheless made prescriptive judgments when faced with non-conforming individuals.

An important open question is what information signals to children that a feature is group relevant and thus normative. Roberts and colleagues (2016) provided children with several converging cues; the groups consisted of individuals in sets of three (thereby highlighting group presence), they were labeled with a common noun (i.e., Hibble or Glerk), and they were described with generic statements in which properties were attributed to categories (e.g., “Hibbles eat these kinds of berries”). When these cues were present, children made prescriptive judgments; when they were absent, children did not. Thus, although children used group regularities to generate prescriptive judgments, it remains unclear which cues or combination of cues shift a behavior from being a descriptive “is” to being a prescriptive “should.” That is, are prescriptive judgments elicited by group presence, category labels, generic statements, or some combination of these three factors?

Seeing a group of individuals engage in a common behavior has profound effects on our social cognition. Take as an example Asch’s (1955) classic research on social pressure (i.e., normative social influence); individuals confronted with three or more people who share a belief feel the pressure to also hold that belief even if they suspect the belief to be false. Thus, because the presence of a group is a strong predictor of conformity, one possibility is that simply seeing a group of individuals who share a common behavior will generate prescriptiveness (i.e., all individual group members *should* share that behavior). Indeed, recent research suggests that being exposed to a group of individuals who share common properties increases the likelihood of that group being perceived as coalitional as well as the likelihood of stereotyping individuals within that group (e.g., Bigler, Jones, & Lobliner, 1997; Cosmides, Tooby, & Kurzban, 2003).

Group labels (i.e., count nouns; Macnamara, 1982), even when only an individual group member is present, play a critical role in shaping young children’s categorization. Labels make categories more salient, encourage children to form new categories and treat them as stable, and promote category-based inferences (Baron, Dunham, Banaji, & Carey, 2014; Gelman & Markman, 1986; Graham, Keates, Vukatana, & Khu, 2013; Waxman & Markow, 1995). For example, Waxman (2010)

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