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How preschoolers react to norm violations is associated with culture

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ABSTRACT

Children from the age of 3 years understand social norms as such and enforce these norms in interactions with others. Differences in parental and institutional education across cultures make it likely that children receive divergent information about how to act in cases of norm violations. In the current study, we investigated whether cultural values are associated with the ways in which children react to norm violations. We tested 80 bicultural 3-year-olds with a norm enforcement paradigm and analyzed their reactions to norm violations. The reactions were correlated to the children's parental cultural values using the Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE) scales, and these results show that parental culture was associated with children's reactions to norm violations. The three strongest correlations were found for institutional collectivism, performance orientation, and assertiveness.

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Introduction

Humans interact with each other socially. One way in which social interactions are guided and controlled is by means of social norms. Members of a society share a set of social norms, meaning that they agree on how things are done (Bruner & et al., 1993). Due to the informal nature of norms as opposed to laws (McAdams, 1997), norms may unravel if norm violators are not punished by members

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of the group (Kendal, Feldman, & Aoki, 2006). People punish norm violators not only in small-scale groups where they know their interaction partners very well but even in anonymous one-shot interactions, a behavior that has been called “altruistic punishment” (Boyd, Gintis, Bowles, & Richerson, 2003). Punishment of norm violators has been shown to assist with sustaining cooperative behavior in human societies, whereas the absence of punishment leads to decreased cooperation (Boyd & Richerson, 1992; Boyd et al., 2003).

The strong cohesion of social norms within a culture makes cross-cultural differences of morality and its manifestations very likely (Tomasello, 2016). Cultural learning mechanisms will cause members of social groups to adopt similar values and beliefs about how other group members will evaluate their behavior (Henrich & Henrich, 2007; Sober & Wilson, 1998). In fact, studies in adults have uncovered cross-cultural differences in cooperative games such as the ultimatum game and the dictator game (Henrich et al., 2005). Large differences have also been revealed using the public goods game, where the willingness of participants to share their private resources with the public is assessed (Gächter & Herrmann, 2009; Herrmann, Thöni, & Gächter, 2008; Kocher, Martinsson, & Visser, 2012). When playing the public goods game, members of some societies are much more likely to virtually not punish contributors, whereas others attach the same importance to this as antisocial punishment (Herrmann et al., 2008).

In the current study, we focused on the association between cultural values and norm enforcement in early ontogeny. During development early in life, children not only learn to do things but also learn to do things the right way—the way “we do things” (Bruner, 1993). During the preschool years, children start to understand that doing something the right way constitutes a social norm (Kalish, 1998; Piaget, 1932; Smetana, 1981; Tomasello & Vaish, 2013; Turiel, 1983), and they learn to enforce these norms when they encounter norm violators (Casler, Terziyan, & Greene, 2009; Köymen et al., 2014; Rakoczy, Brosche, Warneken, & Tomasello, 2009; Rakoczy, Warneken, & Tomasello, 2008; Schmidt, Rakoczy, & Tomasello, 2012). As a result, children are thought to identify with the social norms of their culture in a way that transcends their own individual interests (Schmidt, Rakoczy, & Tomasello, 2011). However, so far only little is known about norm enforcement among preschool children with different cultural backgrounds. One previous study indicates that school-aged children with different religious backgrounds differed in their evaluation of norm violations (Nisan, 1987). Traditional Jewish children took norm violations more seriously than modern Jewish children. Unfortunately, the particular cultural differences that guide differences between these groups (Gelfand et al., 2011; Hofstede, 2001; House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004; Schwartz, 1999) remain unclear. When looking at the precursors of understanding social norms in the sense of benevolent behaviors such as collaboration, helping, and sharing, we have stronger evidence of cross-cultural differences. Children differ in how they divide resources between themselves and other individuals (Blake et al., 2015; House et al., 2013; Rochat et al., 2009; Schäfer, Haun, & Tomasello, 2015). Some of these differences have been attributed to differences in cultural values; more fairness in distributive justice is evident in children growing up in societies with more collective values (Rochat et al., 2009). The interplay of particular cultural values and norm enforcement has yet to be investigated.

Due to differences in teaching across cultures, ranging from explicit verbal instruction to the mere provision of learning opportunities (Rogoff et al., 1993), children receive differential information about how to act in cases of norm violations in different countries. The age group of interest in the current study was preschoolers. According to the interdependence hypothesis for the evolution of human morality (Tomasello, 2016), children younger than 3 years do not yet understand social norms as the shared expectations of “our” social group. Before the age of 3 years, children behave with sympathy and fairness toward others and conform to the actions and imperatives of others. By 3 years, children start to express their cultural identity; they actively enforce social norms, understand themselves as members of a group, and show loyalty to that group. This is a point during human ontogeny when culture becomes critical in social interaction. Interactions with adults and peers are believed to encourage the internalization of values to differing degrees (Tomasello, 2016). For example, more authoritarian parenting styles lead to less internalization of values combined with more strategic norm following, but more inductive parenting styles lead to more internalization of values and, consequently, an increase in self-regulation (Hoffman, 2000).

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