

Children overeagerly seek social rules

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"Preschool children quickly understand individual behaviors and spontaneous actions of others as generalizable, governed by rules, and binding," says Marco F. H. Schmidt. For parents, whose activities are observed by their children on a day-to-day basis, this eagerness to learn may be good and bad news: it may unintentionally result in teaching them "rules," which do not exist. Credit: bokan/fotolia

Three-year-olds quickly absorb social norms. They even understand behaviors as rule-governed that are not subject to any norms, and insist that others adhere to these self-inferred "norms," a study by LMU

psychologist Marco F. H. Schmidt reveals.

Children should say "hello" and "thank you," share and not snatch anyone's bucket out of their hand. From an early age, they learn from adults the rules that determine everyday social interactions. These norms are like a "social glue" and have played a key role in the evolution and maintenance of human cooperation and culture, states Dr. Marco F. H. Schmidt, Head of the "Developmental Origins of Human Normativity" research group at LMU Munich. Together with his team, he investigates from what age and how young children develop an understanding of norms and what psychological and motivational mechanisms allow for this development.

In a study, recently published in the journal *Psychological Science*, Marco F. H. Schmidt, in collaboration with Lucas P. Butler (Assistant Professor at University of Maryland), Julia Heinz and Professor Michael Tomasello (Co-Director at Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, Leipzig), now shows that three-year-olds not only learn [social norms](#) from direct instruction and prohibition – as traditionally assumed, but also seek norms themselves – even inferring them where adults see none. "Preschool children very quickly understand individual behaviors and spontaneous actions of others as generalizable, governed by rules, and binding," states Schmidt.

Intimate relationship to social norms

In this study, which Schmidt headed at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, from where he transferred to LMU in October 2015, the developmental psychologist had three-year-olds incidentally watch spontaneous actions of adults. In one situation, the children watched as a person unknown to them took tools and other items out of their bag, and – in another variant – even useless junk objects out of a trash bag. The person then spontaneously performed a

brief, goal-directed action with these objects, without making any comments. For example, a piece of bark was pulled a bit along the table with a branch. In other variants, the same action was performed spontaneously with minimum pedagogy (with the call "Look!") or unintentionally (with a loud "Oops!"). Irrespective of what the children saw: they judged singular, spontaneous, and apparently purposeless behavior as generalizable and absolutely right – provided that it was not unintentional according to their observation. They even expected another person to do exactly the same and protested when this person did something different with the objects, thus violating the "social norm" inferred by the children. "Preschool children commit the fallacy originally pointed out by the Scottish philosopher David Hume to derive what ought to be from what is. This is even the case when they have incidentally observed a simple action only once, and there is nothing to suggest any underlying norm or rule," states Schmidt. "Thus, these findings suggest that, even without [direct instruction](#), young children draw far-reaching conclusions about the social world they live in," says Lucas P. Butler.

From a psychological perspective, according to Schmidt, this basic tendency exhibited by children at an early age to perceive the social world as inherently normative and rule-governed, could be an expression of their motivation to do things together, identify with their cultural group and acquire cultural knowledge. "It is possibly our common 'intimate relationship' with social norms that holds human societies together at their core," says Schmidt.

More information: M. F. H. Schmidt et al. Young Children See a Single Action and Infer a Social Norm: Promiscuous Normativity in 3-Year-Olds, *Psychological Science* (2016). [DOI: 10.1177/0956797616661182](https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797616661182)

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