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Brief Report

Visual access trumps gender in 3- and 4-year-old children's endorsement of testimony



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ABSTRACT

Several studies have investigated how preschoolers weigh social cues against epistemic cues when taking testimony into account. For instance, one study showed that 4- and 5-year-olds preferred to endorse the testimony of an informant who had the same gender as the children; by contrast, when the gender cue conflicted with an epistemic cue—past reliability—the latter trumped the former. None of the previous studies, however, has shown that 3-year-olds can prioritize an epistemic cue over a social cue. In Experiment 1, we offer the first demonstration that 3-year-olds favor testimony from a same-gender informant in the absence of other cues. In Experiments 2 and 3, an epistemic cue—visual access—was introduced. In those experiments, 3- and 4-year-olds endorsed the testimony of the informant with visual access regardless of whether it was a same-gender informant (Experiment 3) or a different-gender informant (Experiment 2). These results demonstrate that 3-year-olds are able to give more weight to an epistemic cue than to a social cue when evaluating testimony.

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Introduction

Research has uncovered a wide variety of cues young children use when evaluating testimony (e.g., Clément, 2010; Harris, 2012; Mills, 2013). Some of the cues children use make obvious epistemic sense, with visual access being a good example. It has been repeatedly demonstrated that young

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children understand that someone who has looked in a box knows what is inside, whereas a person who has not looked does not (e.g., [Pillow, 1989](#); [Pratt & Bryant, 1990](#); [Sodian, Thoermer, & Dietrich, 2006](#)). Thus, it was shown that preschoolers (including 3-year-olds) are more likely to believe an informant who had seen what was in a box than an informant who had not seen what was in a box (e.g., [Robinson, Champion, & Mitchell, 1999](#)).

Other cues seem to be more social than epistemic in nature. In particular, preschoolers tend to favor—everything else equal—the testimony of an informant who is more similar to them over that of a less similar informant. This has been observed for similarity based on accent ([Kinzler, Corriveau, & Harris, 2011](#)), gender ([Ma & Woolley, 2013](#)), hair color and food preference ([Reyes-Jaquez & Echols, 2013](#), Experiment 1), and minimal group membership ([MacDonald, Schug, Chase, & Barth, 2013](#)).

In spite of the robustness of children's tendency to believe similar informants, evidence suggests that this tendency is trumped by some epistemic cues. In several experiments, young children were more likely to endorse the testimony of a dissimilar informant over that of a similar informant if the dissimilar informant had been accurate in the past and the similar informant had been inaccurate in the past (for accent: [Corriveau, Kinzler, & Harris, 2013](#); for gender: [Taylor, 2013](#); for hair color and food preference: [Reyes-Jaquez & Echols, 2013](#); for minimal group membership: [Elashi & Mills, 2014](#)). This evidence is convergent with several other studies that have shown that for preschoolers (although sometimes only for older preschoolers) cues to past accuracy trump social cues such as familiarity ([Corriveau & Harris, 2009](#)), age ([Jaswal & Neely, 2006](#)), and consensus ([Bernard, Proust, & Clément, 2015](#)) (for an exception in which 4-year-olds favor familiarity over past reliability, see [Danovitch & Mills, 2014](#)).

Strikingly, none of these previous studies has demonstrated a preference for epistemic cues over social cues in 3-year-olds. Some studies did not incorporate this population ([Bernard et al., 2015](#); [Taylor, 2013](#)). One study lumped 3- and 4-year-olds together, making it impossible to independently ascertain the performance of 3-year-olds ([Jaswal & Neely, 2006](#)). In some studies, 3-year-olds did take the epistemic cue into account but still weighed the social cue heavily, so that the children did not clearly favor the epistemic cue when the two cues were conflicting ([Corriveau et al., 2013](#); [Elashi & Mills, 2014](#); [Reyes-Jaquez & Echols, 2013](#)). Finally, in one study, 3-year-olds favored the social cue over the epistemic cue ([Corriveau & Harris, 2009](#)).

The current research investigated how young preschoolers, including a group of 3-year-olds, combine a social cue—similarity of gender—with an epistemic cue—visual access. We chose two cues that could be expected to be strong. As a social cue, gender is a particularly salient category ([Fiske, 1998](#)) that can, for children at least, trump other categories such as age and ethnic group ([Shutts, Banaji, & Spelke, 2010](#)). Although gender has been shown to exert a strong influence on the endorsement of testimony in 4- to 6-year-olds (e.g., [Ma & Woolley, 2013](#)), the current research would be the first demonstration of such an effect in 3-year-olds. The epistemic cue chosen was visual access, a factor that has been shown to strongly influence 3-year-olds' endorsement of testimony ([Pillow, 1989](#); [Robinson et al., 1999](#)).

The three experiments in the current research relied on the same setup. The child was shown two informants standing next to a box. One informant was male and the other was female. The two informants gave conflicting testimony about the content of the box, and the child needed to say what she or he thought was in the box. What was manipulated was the perceptual access the informants had to the content of the box before providing their testimony. In Experiment 1, both informants had seen the content of the box. In the absence of a differential epistemic cue, we expected the child to believe the informant of the same gender. In Experiment 2, only the informant whose gender was different from the child's gender had seen what was in the box. In Experiment 3, only the informant whose gender was the same as the child's gender had seen what was in the box. Taken together, Experiments 2 and 3 allowed us to test the following predictions. If children prefer to use visual access (epistemic cue) to differentiate between conflicting claims, they will choose the informant who has seen inside the box regardless of gender. In contrast, if children tend to be guided by a same-gender preference (social cue), they will choose the same-gender informant regardless of visual access.

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