



Shared cultural knowledge: Effects of music on young children's social preferences



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ABSTRACT

Adults use cultural markers to discern the structure of the social landscape. Such markers may also influence the social preferences of young children, who tend to conform to their own group and prefer others who do so. However, the forces that propel these preferences are unknown. Here, we use social preferences based on music to investigate these forces in four- and five-year-old children. First, we establish that children prefer other children whose favorite songs are familiar to them. Then we show that this effect depends on shared knowledge: children both prefer others who know songs they themselves know, and avoid others who know songs they do not know, irrespective of the target children's liking of the songs. These results suggest that young children have a remarkably selective sensitivity to shared cultural knowledge. Shared knowledge may be a powerful determinant of children's social preferences, both because it underpins effective communication and because it is conveyed by others through social interactions and therefore can serve as a marker of social group identity.

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1. Introduction

The human social world is remarkably complex and varied: diverse factors, including race, gender, political affiliation, and preferences for sports teams, modulate people's social choices and social interactions. Even human infants show social preferences and make social choices based on some of these attributes, but the sources of their preferences and choices are obscure and subject to debate. Do young children's social preferences reflect their sensitivity to specific markers of other people's appropriateness as social partners, or are they mediated by more general psychological factors, such as preferences for those who are familiar or globally similar to the self? In the experiments presented below, we begin to address this question by investigating young children's social preferences based on music.

Some of the social preferences that are prominent in adulthood are already present in early childhood. For example, children aged 2–5 years tend to prefer individuals of their own gender, race, and age (Aboud, 1988; Alexander & Hines, 1994; French, 1987; Kircher & Furby, 1971; Kowalski & Lo, 2001; Martin, Fabes, Evans, & Wyman, 1999), as well as individuals who speak in their native

language and accent (Kinzler, Dupoux, & Spelke, 2007). When pitted against each other, accent overrides race, suggesting that, from very early on, some cues are privileged over others in guiding social preferences (Kinzler, Shutts, DeJesus, & Spelke, 2009). Finally, children prefer others who act prosocially and fairly over those who do not (Heyman & Gelman, 1998; Ng, Heyman, & Barner, 2011).

Sensitivity to some of these factors emerges in infancy. Infants preferentially attend to people who speak their native language with a native accent as opposed to those who speak in a foreign language or accent (Kinzler et al., 2007), to people who speak in an infant-directed style as opposed to adult-directed style (Schachner & Hannon, 2011), to faces of a familiar race and the gender of their most frequent caregivers as opposed to faces of less familiar races or genders (Bar-Haim, Ziv, Lamy, & Hodes, 2006; Kelly et al., 2005; Quinn, Yahr, Kuhn, Slater, & Pascalis, 2002), and to characters who act prosocially over those who act antisocially (Hamlin, Wynn, & Bloom, 2010). Thus, infants and young children are sensitive to attributes that will be socially important later in life.

1.1. Potential determinants of early social choices

Some of the tendencies that have been proposed to underlie children's early social preferences serve to guide preferences in nonsocial as well as social contexts. Children, like adults, may

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prefer objects or events that are familiar over those that are unfamiliar (e.g., Zajonc, 1968). For example, children may prefer native-language speakers because of their greater exposure to these speech sounds (but see Kinzler et al., 2009). Moreover, children, like adults, might be favorably disposed toward any person, object or event that is associated with positive events over those that are associated with negative events (Olson, Banaji, Dweck, & Spelke, 2006; Olson, Dunham, Dweck, Spelke, & Banaji, 2008). For example, children may favor other people of a higher status race because such people have been associated more often with positive events in the child's past experience (Olson, Shutts, Kinzler, & Weisman, 2012). In these two cases, general biases may lead children to prefer specific individuals over others.

In contrast, children's early social preferences may depend on their sensitivity to attributes that mark specifically the qualities of potential social partners. For example, when children meet a new person, they may attend to attributes that indicate whether or not that person is a member of their own social group. Consistent with that possibility, adults automatically encode coalitional affiliations (i.e., collaborative vs. competitive relationships) among individuals, a likely adaptation that has functioned throughout the evolution of our species (Kurzban, Tooby, & Cosmides, 2001). Recent evidence suggests that even preverbal infants are sensitive to behaviors indicative of group affiliations and expect individuals to act similarly to their group members (He & Baillargeon, 2011; Powell & Spelke, 2013). As a second example, children may attend to attributes that make an individual a good communicative partner, including signs that the person is attentive to the child and is both competent and motivated to engage with him or her. Even very young infants are sensitive to signs of social attention and engagement such as direct gaze (Farroni, Csibra, Simion, & Johnson, 2002) and infant-directed speech (Schachner & Hannon, 2011), and young children respond appropriately to evidence bearing on the competence and motives of their communicative partners (e.g., Bonawitz et al., 2011; Koenig, Clément, & Harris, 2004). Below, we consider the latter possibilities in more detail.

1.2. Shared cultural knowledge as a cue to group membership

A particularly potent cue to group membership is shared knowledge of cultural traditions. Members of a given social group often share knowledge about traditions, folk tales and, most relevant to the current experiments, music. Much research from sociology, anthropology and ethnomusicology suggests that cultural knowledge serves to define and delimit social groups (e.g., Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Stokes, 1994): diverse ethnic groups create their own songs to display their boundaries within larger societies, and use music-based ritualistic activities to strengthen both affiliation among group members and social boundaries (e.g., Allen, 1988; Baily, 1994; Stokes, 1994). In the aboriginal cultures of Northern Australia, for example, lineage songs that belong to particular clans can only be sung by members of that or related clans; the control of knowledge of these ancestral songs may play an important role in the formation of social group identity and group affiliation (Ellis, 1985; Magowan, 1994).

However, cultural traditions are associated not only with shared knowledge but also with shared preferences or "taste" (e.g., Bourdieu, 1984). Several strands of research suggest that taste is stratified in societies (e.g., Bourdieu, 1984; DiMaggio, 1987; Gans, 1974; Meyer, 1977; Shepherd, 1977). For instance, music taste varies with social class (Gans, 1974), gender identity (Larson, 1995) and age (Tolhurst, Hollien, & Leeper, 1984). Further, shared taste clearly affects adults' as well as children's social choices (Billig & Tajfel, 1973; Brewer & Silver, 1978; Fawcett & Markson, 2010; Johnstone & Katz, 1957; Zillman & Bhatia, 1989).

Shared knowledge and shared preferences tend to occur together: if we know a song particularly well, we often acquired this knowledge because we had an interest in that kind of music in the first place; conversely, as we gain familiarity with a song as with other entities, our liking for that song is apt to increase. Accordingly, shared knowledge and shared preferences have typically been confounded in research on taste. Nevertheless, people do not like every object or event that they are able to recognize, and people exhibit immediate evaluative responses to novel objects and events (Duckworth, Bargh, Garcia, & Chaiken, 2002). Thus, shared knowledge and shared preferences do not fully covary.

There are reasons to think that shared cultural knowledge is more informative about an individual's past social history than are shared preferences. First, knowledge of cultural products such as songs arises only from exposure to those products, but preferences emerge from multiple sources including (in the case of music) auditory sensitivity (e.g., Masataka, 2006), exposure (e.g., Soley & Hannon, 2010), and even personality. For example, extroversion has been shown to be positively correlated with preference for cheerful vocal music (Rentfrow & Gosling, 2003). Because these factors vary both within and between groups, music preferences will cross-cut social group boundaries to a considerable degree.

Although cultural knowledge depends on exposure to the culture, this exposure can come about in multiple ways in contemporary societies. In particular, knowledge of music can come from listening to the radio, watching television, or browsing the internet as well as from direct interaction with others. As a consequence, shared cultural knowledge also cross-cuts the boundaries of most contemporary social groups. Nevertheless, young children are especially apt to gain new knowledge by interacting directly with others. Infants, for example, learn to focus on the speech sound contrasts of a natural language when they interact directly with a native speaker, but not when they are exposed to the same language in non-interactive video sessions (Kuhl, Tsao, & Liu, 2003). For children, therefore, an individual's cultural knowledge may be more diagnostic of her past social history than are her personal preferences.

Shared cultural knowledge may be more diagnostic of social group membership for a second reason. Although some preferences endure over long time periods, other preferences are subject to change (e.g., LeBlanc, Sims, Siivola, & Obert, 1996), but knowledge tends to endure. Over the course of childhood, in particular, music preferences tend to change significantly, whereas knowledge tends to accumulate and can be strikingly enduring. Knowledge of specific songs, in particular, may endure throughout the life of an individual. Even infants show remarkably long-lasting memory for melodies (Hepper, 1991; Saffran, Loman, & Robertson, 2000). In one recent study, infants who were exposed to one of two highly similar lullabies at 5 months of age recognized the lullaby, and discriminated it from the other lullaby, more than 8 months later (Mehr, Song, & Spelke, 2015). Knowledge of songs therefore is likely to be a more stable source of information about a person's social history.

Finally, there is an evolutionary reason why shared knowledge might be more diagnostic of group membership than shared preferences, at all ages. Until recent times, with the introduction of modern means of disseminating knowledge (e.g., books, recordings, television and the Internet), shared cultural knowledge could only be transmitted by means of direct social interactions. Thus, if an unfamiliar person demonstrated knowledge of the same stories and songs known to the self, there must have been a chain of social transmission linking that person to the people in one's own social group. Examples abound where shared knowledge indicates shared group membership, from private jokes to references to shared stories and gossip. Of course, some of this knowledge was acquired because the members of a group shared interests and preferences. Given that knowledge was exclusively transmitted from one individual to another for most of our species' existence, however, shared

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