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Brief Report

Children with autism spectrum disorder are more trusting than typically developing children



Li Yi^{a,*}, Junhao Pan^a, Yuebo Fan^{b,c}, Xiaobing Zou^d, Xianmai Wang^e, Kang Lee^{f,g,*}

^a Department of Psychology, Sun Yat-sen University, Guangzhou, Guangdong 510275, China

^b Guangzhou Cana School, Guangzhou, Guangdong 510540, China

^c Guangzhou Rehabilitation and Research Center for Children with ASD, Guangzhou, Guangdong 510540, China

^d The Third Affiliated Hospital of Sun Yat-sen University, Guangzhou, Guangdong 510630, China

^e Management School, Jinan University, Guangzhou, Guangdong 510632, China

^f Dr. Eric Jackman Institute of Child Study, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario M5R 2X2, Canada

^g Department of Psychology, University of California, San Diego, La Jolla, CA 92093, USA

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ABSTRACT

The current study examined whether children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) had an indiscriminate trust bias whereby they would believe any information provided by an unfamiliar adult with whom they had no interactive history. Young school-aged children with ASD and their age- and ability-matched typically developing (TD) peers participated in a simple hide-and-seek game. In the game, an experimenter with whom the children had no previous interactive history pointed to or left a marker on a box to indicate the whereabouts of a hidden reward. Results showed that although young school-aged ASD children did not blindly trust any information provided by the unfamiliar adult, they appeared to be more trusting in the adult informant than did their age- and ability-matched TD children.

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Introduction

Young children tend to be credulous about what they are told even if the information challenges their existing knowledge or common sense (e.g., Jaswal, Carrington Croft, Setia, & Cole, 2010; Nobes

* Corresponding authors. Address: Department of Psychology, Sun Yat-sen University, 135 Xingang West Road, Guangzhou 510275, China (L. Yi), Dr. Eric Jackman Institute of Child Study, University of Toronto, 45 Walmer Road, Toronto, Ontario M5R 2X2, Canada (K. Lee).

E-mail addresses: yili5@mail.sysu.edu.cn (L. Yi), kang.lee@utoronto.ca (K. Lee).

et al., 2003; Vosniadou & Brewer, 1992). However, because sources of information are not always reliable, it is important for children to maintain a certain amount of skepticism. Although it is controversial as to whether young typically developing (TD) children demonstrate an indiscriminate trust bias and believe whatever they are told (Clément, Koenig, & Harris, 2004; Couillard & Woodward, 1999; Jaswal et al., 2010; Koenig & Woodward, 2010; Pea, 1982), older preschoolers have been consistently found to show conscious and controlled trust to evaluate what, when, and who to trust (for a review, see Harris, 2007), referred to as “skeptical trust” or selective trust (Clément et al., 2004). To the best of our knowledge, no study has explored how children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) trust others’ testimony.

Despite this gap in the literature, research on ASD children’s deceptive behaviors and their understanding of deception provides some insight into this issue. Although children with ASD can and do tell antisocial and white lies spontaneously in naturalistic settings (Li, Kelley, Evans, & Lee, 2011), they have difficulty in engaging in quintessential deception, namely, instilling false belief into the mind of the intended dupe (Baron-Cohen, 1992; Russell, Mauthner, Sharpe, & Tidswell, 1991; Sodian & Frith, 1992, 1994; Talwar et al., 2012; Yirmiya, Solomonica-Levi, & Shulman, 1996).

Considering ASD children’s specific difficulty in engaging in deception and manipulating others’ beliefs, it is reasonable to infer that they may also have difficulty in showing skepticism about others’ testimonies. In other words, compared with TD children, they may be more likely and willing to believe what they are told. Thus, the current study aimed to examine the indiscriminate trust tendency of young school-aged ASD children compared with their age- and ability-matched TD counterparts. Specifically, we examined whether young school-aged ASD children would show more indiscriminate trust bias than their TD peers when given information by an unfamiliar adult with whom they had no previous interaction. Existing evidence shows that TD children overcome this bias by approximately 3 or 4 years of age. Alternatively, young school-aged ASD children might show skeptical trust similar to that of their TD counterparts.

We used a simple trust game adapted from paradigms of Couillard and Woodward (1999). In this game, an adult with whom children had no previous interaction would either place a marker or point to one of three boxes to inform children that a desirable item was hidden in the box. Children could trust the adult by searching for the item in the box indicated by the informant or, instead, could search in another box that was not indicated. Performing the latter response would suggest that children might not trust the information given by the adult. We chose this relatively simple task to ensure that our sample of children with ASD would understand the verbal instructions of the task because existing studies have shown this task to be appropriate for children with verbal mental age of approximately 5 years. Based on existing evidence (e.g., Clément et al., 2004), we hypothesized that the trust rates of young school-aged TD children in the current study would be higher than chance (33%) but lower than 100%. Given ASD children’s difficulty with deception (e.g., Russell et al., 1991), we hypothesized that ASD children would be more likely to trust information provided by an unfamiliar adult than would their age- and ability-matched counterparts.

Method

Participants

Participants were 22 young school-aged ASD children (age range = 5 years 1 month to 8 years 9 months [5;1–8;9 years], $M_{\text{age}} = 6.94$ years, $SD = 1.05$, 3 female and 19 male), 27 age-matched TD children (age range = 5;1–8;7 years, $M_{\text{age}} = 6.81$ years, $SD = 0.93$, 3 female and 24 male), and 26 ability-matched TD children (age range = 4;1–7;10 years, $M_{\text{age}} = 5.76$ years, $SD = 0.91$, 3 female and 23 male).

All ASD children were previously diagnosed by experienced pediatric psychiatrists to meet the diagnostic criteria for autism according to the DSM-IV (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, fourth edition; American Psychiatric Association, 1994). However, standardized diagnostic scales such as the Autism Diagnostic Interview–Revised (ADI-R; Lord, Rutter, & Le Couteur, 1994) and the Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule (ADOS; Lord et al., 2000) have not been adapted for use in China. To confirm the diagnosis of the ASD children, we used the Chinese version of the Autism Spectrum Quotient–Children’s Version (AQ-Child; Auyeung, Baron-Cohen, Wheelwright, &

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