



My teacher is wrong: Preschoolers' opposition to non-conventional statements[☆]



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 3 July 2015

Received in revised form

10 November 2016

Accepted 15 November 2016

Keywords:

Epistemic authority

Conventional norms

Majority pressure

Testimony

Teacher

Preschoolers

ABSTRACT

We examined the influence of teachers' conflicting opinions on preschoolers' decisions in two contexts: (a) alternative, non-conventional uses of common objects (e.g., using a fork to comb hair), and (b) labeling new objects. In the first context, teachers' conflicting claims involved the acceptability of the alternative use of objects, either rejecting them (*conventional view*) or accepting them (*non-conventional view*). In Study 1 (N = 36, 3 and 5 year-olds), the aim was to evaluate the pressure of a familiar epistemic authority: Children were presented with the opposing claims of their own teacher and a stranger. In Study 2 (N = 91, 5-year-olds), the aim was to evaluate the pressure of a majority of teachers and the role of dissenters. Children were assigned to two conditions: in the dissenter condition (DC), they faced the conflicting opinions of three teachers vs. one teacher, and in the non-dissenter condition (NDC), they faced the unanimous opinion of three teachers. The general results showed that the responses of the 3-year-old children (study 1) were not influenced neither by their teacher nor by the context. By contrast, the 5-year-olds strongly opposed the teachers when they supported a non-conventional way to use common objects, regardless of the informant's familiarity with the informant (their own teacher, study 1), and the degree of consensus among teachers (unanimous or partial majority, study 2). Most children only sided with the informant/s whose claims were conventional (disapproving the alternative use of objects). In the labeling context, 5-year-olds' decisions were influenced more by the unanimous majority of teachers (NDC) than by the partial majority (DC), or by their own teacher. Overall, the findings show that children's previous beliefs have more strength than their compliance with the authority represented by teachers. Moreover, this work provides evidence of preschoolers' resistance – or indifference – to majority pressure.

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1. Introduction

During childhood, essential knowledge of the physical and social world is acquired. A part of this knowledge is learned from other people's testimony rather than direct observation or experience (for a review of the literature, see Harris, 2012; Robinson & Einav, 2014; Rotenberg, 2010). Children can learn through their own experience that water is wet but not that the Earth is a sphere. In the first case, testimony on the properties of water is not essential to acquire this knowledge, but it is in the second case.

In other types of learning, such as vocabulary acquisition or the use of utensils (e.g., cutlery), children can learn new words or the function of a new object, not only from verbal testimony but also

through behavioral cues which complete the information (e.g., an adult names the object while pointing at it or showing how it is used). These cues tend to be regularly repeated by other people.

In all these learning processes, a key factor in accepting the information is trust in the testimonial source and in particular, how much knowledge or epistemic authority is attributed to the source in the given context. Some authors have specifically highlighted the importance of this dimension (Mills, 2013). Adults do not tend to invest unlimited trust in a single source or person. We trust an expert in economics for matters regarding the economy but not for questions of linguistics or building materials. Is the same true for children? A number of recent studies show that, from 5 years, children trust more the information provided by an expert in a particular subject or someone who has privileged access to relevant information, than a non-expert or a person with no access to relevant information (Einav, 2014; Lane & Harris, 2014).

However, there are few studies evaluating children's trust in the testimony of the quintessential epistemic authority: the teacher.

[☆] The study presented in this article was supported by the Ministerio de Economía y Competitividad of Spain (PSI2012-31477), awarded to Ileana Enesco.

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Preschool teachers are undoubtedly an emotional reference in early childhood and can become an attachment figure for children (Van Ijzendoorn, Sagi, & Lanbernon, 1992). In addition to this close relationship, young children also take for granted that their teacher knows all that needs to be known, and furthermore, transmits this knowledge in class (Olson & Bruner, 1996).

Children trust their teacher for various reasons: The teacher is a figure of authority, has academic qualifications, and is treated as an expert by other teachers and by parents, too (Siegel, 2005). In the same vein, recent studies identify benevolence and competence as the two principal dimensions an informant must possess to be trustworthy (Johnston, Mills, & Landrum, 2015; Koenig & Stephens, 2014): The figure of the teacher embodies both dimensions and is thus a testimonial source who can, and in most cases should, be trusted. However, what happens when the information supplied by a teacher conflicts with children's prior knowledge? Do children defer to the epistemic authority of a teacher or, by contrast, trust their own judgement? This is one of the questions addressed in this work.

Chan (2011) and Chan and Tardif (2013) are one of the few authors to study the importance of the teacher's opinion in children's decisions. In these studies, kindergartners and second graders in the United States and Hong Kong were asked to categorize a series of ambiguous objects (e.g., a button which could also be a wheel) or non-ambiguous objects (e.g., a button that was clearly a button) after a fictitious teacher had provided information that conflicted with the opinions previously expressed by the children. Results showed that participants generally endorsed more of the teacher's labels for ambiguous objects than for non-ambiguous objects, although there were some differences across ages and cultures. When the object was non-ambiguous, kindergartners in the United States endorsed more conflicting labels – giving up their prior beliefs and siding with a teacher – than their peers in Hong Kong. The cross-cultural differences disappeared by second grade. These results suggest that factors such as prior knowledge, age and culture influence the trust children invest in a teacher.

In another study Chan (2011, Study 3) asked children aged from five to eight to assess *how right* a teacher's behavior in a story was when she did not behave as expected, but instead breached accepted moral and socio-conventional rules. The results were clear: In 99% of the tests, the children judged the teacher's behavior to be wrong.

Other authors have studied the teacher's influence on the learning of new words or new functions for novel objects (Corriveau & Harris, 2009). Their findings show that from 3 years, children trust a familiar teacher from their school more than an unfamiliar one. However, this level of trust decreases from 4 years, and more clearly from 5 years, when a familiar teacher labels something inaccurately (e.g., labeling a duck a spoon). These results show that other dimensions such as past accuracy may have more influence than a familiar figure of authority, at least when children have no prior knowledge to assist their decision.

In all these previous studies, the teacher was either a stranger artificially given the status of teacher, or was a teacher familiar to the children, but not their own teacher. Some authors suggest that the setting in which studies analyzing trust in testimony are conducted may influence the results. They specifically state that *children might be especially receptive to their teachers' claims in the school context* (Lane & Harris, 2014, p. 6). Following this suggestion, in our first study, one of the informants is the participants' own teacher.

The aim of Study 1 is to assess children's trust in their own teacher versus a stranger in two conventional domains of knowledge: (a) *Alternative use of a common object*: Participants had to decide if the non-conventional use of different familiar objects was right (e.g., a fork used to comb hair); (b) *labeling new objects*: Taking

labeling tasks used in previous studies (Corriveau, Fusaro, & Harris, 2009) as a reference, children had to relate unfamiliar objects with novel labels. In both contexts, children were confronted on film by contradictory information supplied by each informant (their own teacher vs. an unknown woman). Only after seeing the two informants and listening to the different judgements, were children asked their own.

In the labeling trials, we supposed that children would trust the information supplied by their own teacher more than that of the stranger. This prediction took into account Koenig and Stephens' proposal regarding the key dimensions of informants, as well as previous studies on this question with adult informants. Predictions for the alternative use of a common object are more complicated given the nature of the situations. Children observe totally plausible non-conventional uses of familiar objects (e.g., a beach bucket used as a salad bowl) and listen to the opposing opinions of two informants (*it is ok to use ___ for ___ vs. it isn't ok to use ___ for ___*). We ruled out absurd situations in which physically impossible functions are defended (e.g., claiming that an object with no containment capacity is for drinking), since previous studies (Schillaci & Kelemen, 2014) have shown that from at least 4 years children actively reject absurd suggestions even when defended by an adult majority. They similarly lose trust in an adult seen to make mistakes in simple tasks (e.g., wrongly labeling common objects). Consequently, a likely hypothesis in this setting is that children will be more disposed to accept the non-conventional – but plausible – use of an object when defended by their teacher rather than by a stranger. Alternatively, if we assume that preschoolers are critical of the breaching of rules, be they socio-conventional rules like ways of eating, dressing, greeting, etc., (Nucci, 1981; Smetana, 1981), or game rules (Rakoczy, Warneken, & Tomasello, 2008), it cannot be ruled out that they follow their own normative understanding more than the teacher's authority.

Few studies analyze developmental differences when using teachers as informants (Chan, 2011; Corriveau & Harris, 2009) and their differing conclusions prevent us making robust predictions. Broadly speaking, we predict that as participant age, and consequently, their knowledge of the world increases, trust in the teacher will decrease in situations where their prior knowledge contradicts the teacher's testimony. Some authors explain this tendency by allusion to developmental changes in the heuristics children use to assess testimony (see Harris et al., 2012). Thus, children's increasing knowledge and greater capacity to weigh the information and the informant, allow us to predict a reduced trust in the teacher.

The results of the first study left some questions open. This motivated the design of the next study in which we continued to explore the influence of teachers' conflicting opinions on preschoolers' decisions. We used the same paradigm of conflicting claims from Study 1, but included a relevant dimension in the research about trust in testimony: Consensus in the information provided by different people. Some recent studies have assessed children's preference for consensus testimony when presented in the form of a majority of adults who voice an opinion in opposition to a lone dissenter (Chen, Corriveau, & Harris, 2011; Chen, Corriveau, & Harris, 2013; Corriveau, Fusaro et al., 2009; Schillaci & Kelemen, 2014). The results of these studies have shown that from the age of 4, children are sensitive to the consensus opinion in the acquisition of new knowledge as, for example, when deciding the name or the functions of new objects. In these studies, the consensus opinion is provided by unfamiliar adults. No information is given about who they are or what they know. We adapted this paradigm to our purposes. Accordingly, the informants in Study 2 were presented as teachers from another school, so as to reinforce the idea they had expert knowledge. An additional goal of this second study was to explore the sensitivity of preschoolers to the presence or absence of a dissenter teacher faced with a majority. To the best of our

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