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Humor and preschoolers' trust: Sensitivity to changing intentions

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ABSTRACT

This research demonstrates that preschoolers (a) avoid trusting informants with humorous intentions when learning novel information and (b) flexibly consider current intentions rather than initial intentions when determining who to trust. In Study 1 ($N = 61$), 3- and 4-year-olds based their trust on intentions or intentional cues alone, trusting a sincere informant over a joker, even when no prior accuracy or inaccuracy was displayed. In Study 2 ($N = 32$), 3- and 4-year-olds flexibly based their trust on the informants' current intentions or intentional cues rather than their initial ones. Children trusted a sincere informant, who originally joked, over a joker, who was originally sincere. In Study 3 ($N = 89$), 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds tracked changing intentions, and not just intentional cues, in determining who to trust. Children trusted an informant who joked during training trials but was sincere during test trials over an informant who was ignorant during training trials and was sincere during test trials. However, if the ignorant informant became knowledgeable and the joker continued to joke, the pattern reversed. This is the first study to show that preschoolers consider intentions to joke when learning information. This is also the first study to show that preschoolers do not see trust as stable but rather see it as a function of changing intentions.

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Introduction

Humans acquire a large amount of information without directly experiencing the empirical evidence associated with it (e.g., Cimpian, Brandone, & Gelman, 2010). Without this ability, we could not learn about history, religion, or countries and cultures not yet experienced (e.g., Harris, 2012; Harris & Koenig, 2006). A large body of research suggests that children do not blindly trust just anyone; children consider *who* to trust (e.g., Clément, Koenig, & Harris, 2004; Corriveau, Meints, & Harris, 2009; Koenig & Harris, 2005; Pasquini, Corriveau, Koenig, & Harris, 2007). However, in a world where intentions change over time (e.g., Cohen & Levesque, 1990), an important question is whether children trust individuals on some occasions but not on others (e.g., Nurmsoo & Robinson, 2009; Robinson, Butterfill, & Nurmsoo, 2011; Robinson & Nurmsoo, 2009; Scofield & Behrend, 2008; Sobel & Corriveau, 2010; VanderBorght & Jaswal, 2009). Specifically, do children trust informants when they intend to give correct information, but not when they intend to give incorrect information, regardless of their initial intentions? Thus, the question becomes not just *who* to trust but also *when* to trust a given person. In the current studies, we sought to determine whether children (a) know not to trust someone who intends to joke and (b) consider current intentions, not initial intentions, when deciding who to trust.

Preschoolers consider past behaviors when deciding who to trust. For example, when learning new words, 4-year-olds trust an informant who previously labeled familiar objects correctly over an informant who labeled them incorrectly. Thus, children trust accurate informants over inaccurate informants (e.g., Clément et al., 2004; Koenig & Harris, 2005). In addition, 4-year-olds mistrust informants who were previously sometimes inaccurate rather than consistently inaccurate (Corriveau et al., 2009; Pasquini et al., 2007). Furthermore, children trust accurate informants regardless of their age, trusting accurate children over inaccurate adults (Jaswal & Neely, 2006).

Children also base their trust on informants' knowledge. For example, Einav and Robinson (2011) showed two puppets correctly labeling objects, with one of the puppets doing so on its own and the other requiring help. When later learning new labels, 4-year-olds, but not 3-year-olds, trusted the puppet that did not need help.

Most of the research to date suggests that children believe that previously accurate or knowledgeable informants can be trusted in the future, whereas previously inaccurate or ignorant informants cannot. However, people are not statically trustworthy or untrustworthy, and recent research suggests that sometimes children do not statically trust or mistrust the same individuals (e.g., Nurmsoo & Robinson, 2009; Robinson & Nurmsoo, 2009; Robinson et al., 2011; Scofield & Behrend, 2008; Shafto, Eaves, Navarro, & Perfors, 2012; Sobel & Corriveau, 2010; VanderBorght & Jaswal, 2009). Rather, people are trustworthy at some times but not at others.

One way in which children might change who they trust is by considering intentions. Intention is an important factor to consider in terms of trust because a critical aspect of intention is that it is not a stable mental state. People's intentions change over time (e.g., Cohen & Levesque, 1990; Roy, 2009; van der Hoek, Jamroga, & Wooldridge, 2007). According to Cohen and Levesque (1990), people "keep (or commit to) intentions, but not forever; [they] discharge those intentions believed to have been satisfied" (p. 214). Thus, people can revise or complete their intentions, moving onto new intentions. Therefore, people can, for example, intend to say the wrong thing in order to joke. However once they are done joking, they can then intend to say the right thing to communicate or inform others. Accordingly, the current intention, rather than the former intention, of an informant should be important in deciding whether to trust the informant.

A computational model suggests that children likely base their trust, in part, on intentions (Shafto et al., 2012). In addition, from 4 years (but not 3 years) of age, children do not trust liars (Mascaro & Sperber, 2009). From 3 years, children understand that pretending is not a reliable cue for acquiring correct information compared with, for example, having direct experience with the relevant information (Koenig, 2012). The current studies extended this research by considering a third type of intention to do the wrong thing in the context of trust—joking.

We chose to compare joking and sincerity because joking is a clear example of intentionally saying or doing the wrong thing (e.g., Hoicka & Gattis, 2008; Hoicka, Jutsum, & Gattis, 2008; Leekam, 1991);

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