Knowing when to trust a teacher: The contribution of category status and sample composition to young children's judgments of informant trustworthiness

Chris A. Lawson

Department of Educational Psychology, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, Milwaukee, WI 53211, USA

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Two experiments examined the extent to which category status influences children's attention to the composition of evidence samples provided by different informants. Children were told about two informants, each of whom presented different samples of evidence, and then were asked to judge which informant they would trust to help them learn something new. The composition of evidence samples was manipulated such that one sample included either a large number ($n = 5$) or a diverse range of exemplars relative to the other sample, which included either a small number ($n = 2$) or a homogeneous range of exemplars. Experiment 1 revealed that participants ($N = 37$; $M_{age} = 4.76$ years) preferred to place their trust in the informant who presented the large or diverse sample when each informant was labeled "teacher" but exhibited no preference when each informant was labeled "child." Experiment 2 revealed developmental differences in responses when labels and sample composition were pitted against each other. Younger children ($n = 32$; $M_{age} = 3.42$ years) consistently trusted the "teacher" regardless of the composition of the sample the informant was said to have provided, whereas older children ($n = 30$; $M_{age} = 5.54$ years) consistently trusted the informant who provided the large or diverse sample regardless of whether it was provided by a "teacher" or a "child." These results have important implications for understanding the interplay between children's category knowledge and their evaluation of evidence.

© 2018 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

E-mail address: lawson2@uwm.edu

Introduction

Young children rely on several sources of input to evaluate the trustworthiness of informants. For example, children prefer to trust informants who have been more reliable in the past compared with those who have been less reliable (Birch, Vauthier, & Bloom, 2008; Gweon, Pelton, Konopka, & Schulz, 2014; Harris & Koenig, 2006). Children also rely on category status to judge whether to trust an informant; two-year-olds prefer to learn new words from an adult rather than a child (Jaswal & Neely, 2006), and by 3 years children rely on category status to determine who is most knowledgeable about a certain topic (VanderBorght & Jaswal, 2009; see also Lutz & Keil, 2002; Sobel & Corriveau, 2009). The category status of "teachers" may be a particularly salient marker to confer trust. Children are keenly aware that teachers are intentional in their selection of information (Ziv & Frye, 2004), and they rely on the contents of samples to determine what teachers intend for them to learn (Shafto, Goodman, & Frank, 2012). With these issues in mind, the current experiments examined the extent to which the category status of an informant draws children's attention to the composition of samples when deciding whether to trust an informant.

In the current experiments, sample composition was manipulated by using a modified version of the sample comparison task, a task commonly used in the inductive reasoning literature (e.g., Lopez, Gelman, Gutheil, & Smith, 1992). Studies using the sample comparison task have shown that people tend to favor diverse and large samples for the purpose of making predictions (Heit, 2000). In the current experiments, children were provided one evidence sample that included either a diverse range or large number of exemplars and another evidence sample that included either a non-diverse range or small number of exemplars. (See Fig. 1 for an example of a sample size item used in Experiment 1. A full list of items is provided as online supplementary material.) The evidence samples were described as having been provided by different informants, and children were asked to decide which informant they would trust to help them learn about a new target. In some cases informants were given the label "teacher," and in other cases informants were given the label "child." The prediction was that children would pay more attention to the composition of samples provided by teachers and, therefore, would place greater trust in the informant who provided the diverse or large sample when actors were labeled "teacher" but not when they were labeled "child."
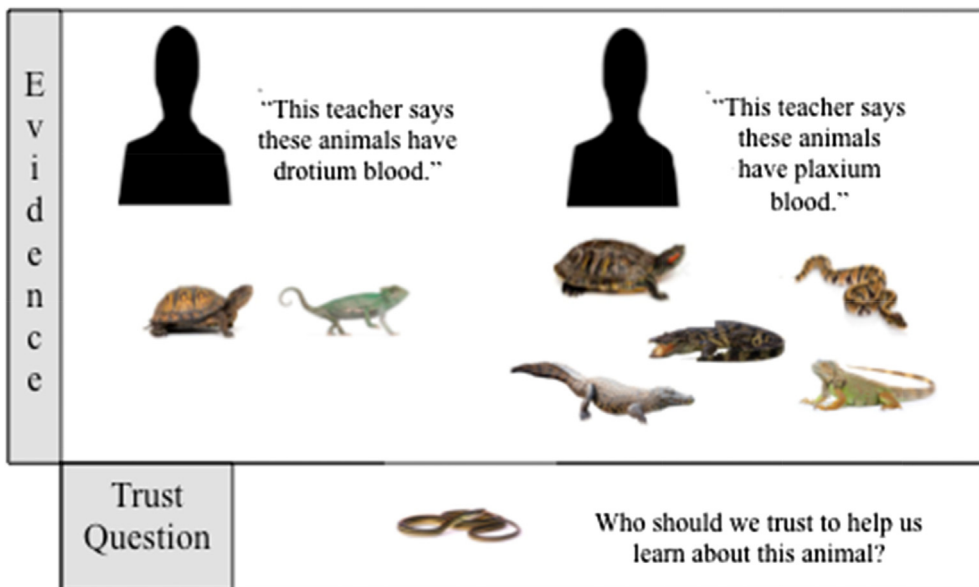

Fig. 1. Sample item from Experiment 1.