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Preschoolers' credulity toward misinformation from ingroup versus outgroup speakers



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ABSTRACT

The current research examined preschoolers' credulity toward misinformation from ingroup versus outgroup speakers. Experiment 1 showed that when searching for a hidden toy, Caucasian English monolingual 4-year-olds were credulous toward the false testimony of a race-and-accent ingroup speaker, despite their firsthand observations of the hiding event, but were skeptical when the false testimony was provided by a race-and-accent outgroup speaker. In the same experiment, 3-year-olds were credulous toward the false testimony of both speakers. Experiment 2 showed that when the false testimony was provided by a same-race-only or same-accent-only speaker, 4-year-olds were not particularly credulous or skeptical. The findings are discussed in relation to how intergroup bias might contribute to the selective credulity in the 4-year-olds as well as the factors that might explain the indiscriminate credulity in the 3-year-olds.

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Introduction

In some circumstances, young children are credulous and have the tendency to believe in another person's statements that contradict their firsthand experiences, existing knowledge, or intuitive biases (Dawkins, 1995; Harris et al., 2012). This credulity may be rooted in early cultural transmission; for learning to occur in the first place, children must be open-minded and accept what they are told by others at face value (Harris et al., 2012). Empirical research demonstrates that in some circumstances

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toddlers and preschoolers are indeed credulous toward an adult's claims that are obviously false (e.g., Heyman, Sritanyaratana, & Vanderbilt, 2013; Jaswal, 2010; Ma & Ganea, 2010). The current study sought to extend these findings and explore whether preschoolers display different levels of credulity toward misinformation from ingroup versus outgroup speakers.

It has been shown that toddlers are credulous toward another person's false testimony that is contrary to their intuitive biases. For example, Jaswal (2010) examined whether 2-year-olds believed in an adult's testimony that ran counter to their natural "gravity" bias (i.e., objects are likely to fall straight down with no support). After a ball was dropped down a constructed chimney shoot, an experimenter stated that the ball had landed in a location that conflicted with where the ball should have landed given the pull of gravity. The results indicated that 2-year-olds typically deferred to the false testimony despite their natural inkling to expect the ball to fall straight down the shoot. However, in a follow-up experiment where they were provided with continued visual evidence as to where the ball had dropped (i.e., using a clear tube), 2-year-olds did not defer to the false testimony.

Furthermore, there is empirical evidence that preschoolers may be credulous toward another person's false claims that contradict their own firsthand observations. Ma and Ganea (2010) examined preschoolers' reliance on their firsthand observations versus what they were told by an adult when searching for a hidden object. In this study, children watched as an adult placed a toy in one of three containers. Immediately afterward, the adult told children that the toy was in a container different from where it was actually hidden. When asked to retrieve the toy, most 4- and 5-year-olds disregarded the adult's false testimony and relied on their firsthand observations. However, most 3-year-olds were credulous and followed the false testimony to search for the toy despite their firsthand observations of the hiding event (Ma & Ganea, 2010, Study 1). Related evidence was found in an experiment where 3- and 4-year-olds were provided with misleading advice about the location of a sticker from an infamous storybook character (i.e., the "Big Bad Wolf"); the 4-year-olds were successful at rejecting the misleading advice, but the 3-year-olds were credulous approximately 50% of the time despite the Big Bad Wolf being an obviously unreliable source (Heyman et al., 2013).

Together, these findings demonstrate that in some circumstances young children are credulous toward the false testimony of others that is contrary to their existing biases or firsthand experiences. Nevertheless, there is ample evidence that when two informants are placed in direct contrast and provide conflicting information, young children are able to consider a range of cues to decide whom to trust. For example, preschoolers can engage in epistemic reasoning and favor information from speakers who are knowledgeable rather than ignorant (Sabbagh & Baldwin, 2001), previously accurate or reliable (e.g., Koenig, Clément, & Harris, 2004; Pasquini, Corriveau, Koenig, & Harris, 2007), and experts in the subject area rather than novices (e.g., Koenig & Jaswal, 2011). They also display selective trust in others based on non-epistemic grounds and prefer to learn from those who are honest or intelligent (Lane, Wellman, & Gelman, 2013), benevolent (e.g., Landrum, Mills, & Johnston, 2013), confident (Birch, Akmal, & Frampton, 2009), physically attractive (Bascandziev & Harris, 2014), and physically abled rather than disabled or obese (Jaffer & Ma, 2015).

Of particular relevance to the current study, young children also pick up on the speaker's social group membership to decide whom to trust for novel information. In particular, it has been shown that preschoolers prefer to learn from ingroup speakers rather than outgroup speakers when the two sources are placed in direct contrast with each other. For example, when learning about novel objects, preschoolers favor information from native-accented speakers rather than foreign-accented speakers (e.g., Corriveau, Kinzler, & Harris, 2013, Experiment 1; Kinzler, Corriveau, & Harris, 2011) and from speakers of their own gender (Ma & Woolley, 2013) or their own race (e.g., Chen, Corriveau, & Harris, 2013). They also prefer to learn from speakers of an ingroup whose social group membership is established by minimal group markers (e.g., wearing the same color as the children; Elashi & Mills, 2014).

This preference for ingroup informants in social learning may be a form of intergroup bias. Intergroup bias refers to the systematic tendency to evaluate or treat ingroup members more favorably than outgroup members. It can take the form of ingroup favoritism and/or outgroup derogation (Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002). Tajfel and colleagues were among the first to study the effects of ingroup and outgroup categorization on adults' intergroup behavior. Using the minimal group paradigm, they found that adults favored ingroup members over outgroup members in reward distribution

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