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The role of consensus and culture in children's imitation of inefficient actions



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ABSTRACT

A significant body of work has demonstrated children's imitative abilities when learning novel actions. Although some research has examined the role of cultural background in children's imitation of inefficient actions, to our knowledge no research has explored how culture and conformity interact when engaging in imitation. In Study 1, 87 Caucasian American and Chinese American preschoolers were presented with either one model or three models performing an inefficient action. Whereas there were no cultural differences in imitation in the *Single Model* condition, Chinese Americans were significantly more likely to copy the model's preference for an inefficient tool in the *Consensus* condition. Children's tool choice was associated with their justification for their choice as well as their memory for the model's action. Study 2 explored the impact of immigration status on the cultural differences in children's tool choice by including 16 first-generation Caucasian American children. When comparing the findings with the rates from Study 1, both groups of Caucasian American preschoolers imitated at rates significantly lower than the Chinese American preschoolers. We suggest that the tool choices of Caucasian American children relate to a tendency to engage in a perceptually driven mode of learning, whereas the choices of the Chinese American children reflect a greater likelihood to use a socially driven mode.

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Introduction

Imitation is a powerful learning mechanism used by young children to acquire information. Through imitation and emulation, both human children and some species of non-human animals can learn cultural information, such as how to “appropriately” use particular tools (e.g., Harris, 2012; Horner & Whiten, 2005; Whiten, McGuigan, Marshall-Pescini, & Hopper, 2009), as well as particular social conventions (Kenward, Karlsson, & Persson, 2011; Over & Carpenter, 2012; van de Waal, Borgeaud, & Whiten, 2013; Whiten, Horner, & de Waal, 2005). Indeed, humans are so prone to imitate that they sometimes imitate actions not required to achieve the particular goal (i.e., “over-imitation”; Horner & Whiten, 2005; Kenward, 2012; Keupp, Behne, & Rakoczy, 2013; Lyons, Damrosch, Lin, Macris, & Keil, 2007; Lyons, Young, & Keil, 2007; Nielsen, Mushin, Tomaselli, & Whiten, 2014; Nielsen & Tomaselli, 2010). Similarly, in some situations children imitate less efficient actions—despite the fact that these actions lead to sacrificing the intended goal (DiYanni & Kelemen, 2008; DiYanni, Nini, & Rheel, 2011; DiYanni, Nini, Rheel, & Livelli, 2012). Taken together, this research suggests that children view a demonstrated action to be socially prescribed and normative—even if it is irrelevant from a strictly pragmatic point of view (Kenward, 2012; Kenward et al., 2011; Keupp et al., 2013).

Despite a propensity to imitate demonstrated actions, children can be relatively selective in the actions they imitate. For example, Nielsen and Blank (2011) presented 4- and 5-year-olds with two adult models. Each model opened a puzzle box, but one model included irrelevant actions. When children were invited to open the puzzle box in the presence of the more efficient model, children imitated only the causally relevant actions. In contrast, children imitated the unnecessary actions in the presence of the less efficient model. Similarly, DiYanni and colleagues (2011) found that children were more likely to imitate a model’s inefficient action if they performed the action in the model’s presence. Thus, children’s imitative abilities may be influenced by social and situational cues.

Here, we explored one important social cue young children use when determining what to learn from individuals—group consensus. Classic social psychological research indicates that adults concede to a majority opinion on approximately 33% of trials—even if the opinion is inaccurate (e.g., Asch, 1956). More recent studies have found that, like adults, toddlers and preschoolers pay particular attention to consensus information (e.g., Chen, Corriveau, & Harris, 2013; Claudière & Whiten, 2012; Corriveau, Fusaro, & Harris, 2009; Fusaro & Harris, 2008; Haun, Rekers, & Tomasello, 2012; Haun, Van Leeuwen, & Edelson, 2013; Hermann, Legare, Harris, & Whitehouse, 2013). Indeed, even when preschoolers are presented with a clearly incorrect consensus opinion, they display rates of deference similar to adults (e.g., Corriveau & Harris, 2010; Haun & Tomasello, 2011; see also Costanzo & Shaw, 1966; Walker & Andrade, 1996).

Across two studies, we examined whether children’s attention to consensus would affect how they learn about tools. Specifically, we asked whether children would be more willing to imitate a non-optimal tool preference if it was demonstrated by a consensus than if it was demonstrated by a single model. As mentioned above, some work on children’s perceptual decision making indicates that children are somewhat willing to defer to the judgment of the consensus (e.g., Corriveau & Harris, 2010; Corriveau, Kim, Song, & Harris, 2013; Haun & Tomasello, 2011; Hermann et al., 2013). In the current set of studies, we asked whether children are deferential when making decisions about unexpected tool functions, a task that involves both visual evaluation and physical action for goal completion.

We presented children with either (a) a single model who chose the same inefficient tool for a task over a more efficient alternative three times or (b) three models who each opted for the same inefficient tool once. We predicted that children would be more willing to engage in faithful imitation of the model’s preference for the inefficient tool when they had watched a consensus choose the tool than when they had watched a single model.

Our second goal was to explore cultural differences in children’s faithful imitation. In Study 1, we tested two cultural groups: first-generation Chinese American preschoolers (children were born in the United States but parents were not) and at least second-generation Caucasian American preschoolers (children and parents were born in the United States). In Study 2, we confirmed that the effects found in Study 1 were based on cultural differences—and not on social group membership—by testing a group of first-generation Caucasian American preschoolers. We focused on these groups because

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