



How do children weigh competence and benevolence when deciding whom to trust?



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ABSTRACT

In three experiments, we investigate how 187 3- to 5-year-olds weigh competence and benevolence when deciding whom to trust. Children were presented with two informants who provided conflicting labels for novel objects – one informant was competent, but mean, the other incompetent, but nice. Across experiments, we manipulated the order in which competence and benevolence were presented and the way in which they were described (via trait labels or descriptions of prior behavior). When competence was described via prior behavior (Experiments 1–2), children endorsed the informants' labels equally. In contrast, when competence was described via trait labels (Experiment 3), children endorsed labels provided by the competent, mean informant. When considering children's endorsement at the individual level, we found their ability to evaluate competence, not benevolence, related to their endorsements. These findings emphasize the importance of considering *how* children process information about informants and use this information to determine whom to trust.

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1. Introduction

As access to all kinds of information is ever increasing—especially through freely accessible domains such as the Internet—it is crucial that people sift through the dregs in order to selectively trust reliable sources. Even children can do this to some extent, at least when evaluating conflicting claims provided by informants who vary across a single characteristic (e.g., prior accuracy: Koenig & Harris, 2005; niceness: Mascaro & Sperber, 2009; familiarity: Corriveau & Harris, 2009b; see Mills, 2013 for a review). However, given that informants in children's everyday lives are multidimensional, it is important to understand how children evaluate informants that possess both positive and negative qualities.

Social psychology research suggests that when evaluating others based on multiple characteristics simultaneously, adults generally base their evaluations on two broad dimensions of social cognition—*competence* (i.e., someone's ability to provide accurate information; including characteristics like history of accuracy and expertise) and *benevolence* (i.e., someone's intention to do good or bad; including characteristics like niceness and honesty; Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007; Wojciszke, 2005). Like adults, children also

seem to use information regarding competence and benevolence to evaluate potential sources (Mills, 2013; Shafto, Baxter, Navarro, & Perfors, 2012). When only information about source competence is provided, children frequently endorse claims provided by the most competent source (e.g., Einav & Robinson, 2011; Koenig & Harris, 2005), and when only information about source benevolence is provided, children frequently endorse claims provided by the most benevolent source (e.g., Lane, Wellman, & Gelman, 2013; Mascaro & Sperber, 2009). However, in studies where both competence and benevolence are provided and conflicting in valence (i.e., the competent source is not benevolent, or vice versa), the results are more complicated. In research to date, children appear to weigh competence and benevolence differently depending on the characteristic used to convey competence. In one study, when expertise was used to convey competence, children prioritized benevolence, endorsing a nice non-expert over a mean expert (Landrum, Mills, & Johnston, 2013). Yet, in another study, when perceptual access was used to convey competence, children weighed the two dimensions equally, showing no preference between a nice/honest person without perceptual access and a mean/dishonest person with perceptual access (Lane et al., 2013).

Perhaps children put greater weight on certain characteristics of competence than others because they realize that these characteristics provide more direct evidence that an informant will provide accurate information. For instance, although knowing about

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Table 1
Overview of primary methodological differences between Experiments 1–3.

Experiment	Presentation order	Benevolence information	Competence information
Experiment 1	Benevolence first	Trait labels (i.e., “nice” and “mean”)	Descriptions of prior accuracy
Experiment 2	Counterbalanced	Descriptions of helping and hindering behavior	Descriptions of prior accuracy
Experiment 3	Counterbalanced	Descriptions of helping and hindering behavior	Trait labels (i.e., “smart” and “not smart”)

someone’s domain of expertise provides insight into what that person is likely to know (e.g., eagle experts are likely to know about eagles and other birds, Landrum et al., 2013), expertise does not provide any direct information about whether an informant will actually provide accurate information. Thus, when expertise conflicts with niceness, it may be safer to avoid a mean expert in favor of a nice non-expert (as children did in Landrum et al., 2013), because at least the nice non-expert has the *intention* of providing accurate information. Similarly, even if there is direct confirmation that an informant has relevant knowledge through perceptual access (as in Lane et al., 2013), there is still no evidence that the informant will accurately convey that information, making it unclear whom to trust if the person with perceptual access is mean or dishonest (as in Lane et al., 2013). Given that children have weighed competence and benevolence differently depending on the characteristic used to convey competence, it may be that children have a rich understanding of which characteristics provide the most direct evidence that an informant will provide accurate information.

If this were the case, we should expect that children would begin to prioritize competence over benevolence if the characteristic used to convey competence provided direct evidence that an informant had provided accurate information in the past. To illustrate, even though a mean informant is more likely to lie than a nice informant, this concern should be mitigated if the mean informant has a history of responding accurately in the past. In fact, in many ways it appears that children are sensitive to the highly informative nature of prior accuracy. By 8 months of age, children will adjust their behavior based on information provided by a previously accurate informant (Tummeltshammer, Wu, Sobel, & Kirkham, 2014), and preschoolers will prioritize prior accuracy over other meaningful characteristics, such as age (Jaswal & Neely, 2006), familiarity (Corriveau & Harris, 2009b), and native accent (Corriveau, Kinzler, & Harris, 2013). Thus, it is possible that children will prioritize competence over benevolence in their trust decisions if they are offered *proof* of an informant’s history of providing accurate claims instead of relying on their understanding of what an informant should know. Our first goal in this set of experiments was to examine whether children would prioritize competence when it was portrayed in terms of prior accuracy, which we did by asking children (in Experiments 1 and 2) to evaluate conflicting claims provided by informants who differed across both accuracy and niceness.

In addition to our first goal, we also had a second goal (which we address in Experiments 2 and 3) – to explore the ways in which contextual factors (i.e., variations in how children learn about the informants) might influence children’s trust decisions. Until now, there has been little research devoted to this topic in the epistemic trust literature, though there are clearly a host of contextual factors that might influence children’s trust. For instance, children’s evaluations of others are sometimes influenced by the order in which they learn about characteristics (e.g., Singh & Singh, 1994) and the way in which characteristics are described (e.g., as traits or examples of prior behavior; Liu, Gelman, & Wellman, 2007). To begin to get a picture of how contextual factors might influence children’s trust, we explored each of these contextual factors in our current set of experiments.

With respect to order, previous research suggests that children are sometimes influenced by recency effects, in which greater weight is placed on the most recent evidence rather than first

impressions (e.g., Feldman, Klosson, Parsons, Rholes, & Ruble, 1976; Moran & McCullers, 1984; Schlottman & Anderson, 1995). For instance, when children predict another student’s exam score based on information regarding the student’s (a) motivation and (b) ability, their predictions are most influenced by whichever characteristic they learned about second (Singh & Singh, 1994). That said, children in this previous work only assessed one individual at a time and were not asked to make trust decisions. It is unclear how order effects will come into play when children’s impressions are based on a relative comparison between two informants, rather than a static piece of information regarding one individual.

With respect to the way in which characteristics are described, it is clear that children can learn about informant characteristics in a variety of ways. For instance, sometimes children learn about someone’s characteristics from trait labels (e.g., “Johnny is a very nice boy”), but other times children have to make their own inferences about an informant’s characteristics based on descriptions of someone’s prior behavior (e.g., hearing about how Johnny helped someone carry a box) or witnessing the behavior themselves. Previous research has shown that learning about a characteristic via trait labels, rather than descriptions of prior behavior, not only increases children’s ability to predict future behavior (e.g., Liu et al., 2007), but also their interpretation of how stable a particular trait is (e.g., Gelman & Heyman, 1999). In many ways this makes sense given that trait labels are inherently generic, providing information that is meant to generalize across a wide variety of features (e.g., behavior, mental states, abilities) and contexts. Thus, although previous research suggests that children are able to use both trait labels (e.g., Lane et al., 2013) and prior behavior (e.g., Koenig & Harris, 2005) to endorse conflicting claims, it is possible that that trait labels will have a greater impact on children’s trust when children are asked to simultaneously weigh trait labels and descriptions of prior behavior.

In the three experiments that follow, we examined the influence that these contextual factors (i.e., order and description type) have on children’s trust decisions. Children always endorsed conflicting claims provided by two informants who differed across competence and benevolence, but the order in which the characteristics were presented and the way in which the characteristics were described (i.e., as traits or examples of prior behavior) varied. See Table 1 for an overview of how we manipulated these factors across experiments.

2. Experiment 1: Benevolence (trait labels) before competence (behavior)

In our first experiment, we began to address our first goal, examining how children weigh accuracy and niceness when determining whom to trust. We used the same basic paradigm that has been used in previous research examining how children weigh accuracy in comparison to other informant characteristics (e.g., familiarity: Corriveau & Harris, 2009b; accent: Corriveau et al., 2013; group membership: Elashi & Mills, 2014; MacDonald, Schug, Chase, & Barth, 2013). Specifically, we first presented children with two informants who differed in whether they were nice or mean and asked them to endorse conflicting claims provided by the informants. Then, after establishing children’s initial levels of trust based on niceness, we presented them with information regarding each informant’s accuracy, such that the nice informant

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