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Consciousness and Cognition

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/concog

Vision, knowledge, and assertion



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 12 August 2015

Revised 6 October 2015

Accepted 6 January 2016

Keywords:

Social cognition

Perception

Vision

Knowledge

Assertion

Folk epistemology

ABSTRACT

I report two experiments studying the relationship among explicit judgments about what people see, know, and should assert. When an object of interest was surrounded by visibly similar items, it diminished people's willingness to judge that an agent sees, knows, and should tell others that it is present. This supports the claim, made by many philosophers, that inhabiting a misleading environment intuitively decreases our willingness to attribute perception and knowledge. However, contrary to stronger claims made by some philosophers, inhabiting a misleading environment does not lead to the opposite pattern whereby people deny perception and knowledge. Causal modeling suggests a specific psychological model of how explicit judgments about perception, knowledge, and assertability are made: knowledge attributions cause perception attributions, which in turn cause assertability attributions. These findings advance understanding of how these three important judgments are made, provide new evidence that knowledge is the norm of assertion, and highlight some important subtleties in folk epistemology.

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1. Introduction

Members of many species are sensitive to another individual's gaze, which can provide useful information, such as whether the individual will approach. This has been documented in mammals, birds, reptiles, and fish (Emery, 2000). Many of these animals do more than exhibit gaze sensitivity; they also follow another's gaze by looking in the same direction, which can provide useful information about food, mates, or predators. This is true of humans beginning in infancy, all the great apes, numerous other primate species, corvids, cetaceans, some domesticated mammals, and perhaps others (Shepherd, 2010).

Many animals do more than just follow gaze; they also have at least some appreciation for what others can and cannot see (Caron, Kiel, Dayton, & Butler, 2002; Senju & Csibra, 2008; Hare, Call, Agnetta, & Tomasello, 2000; Amici, Aureli, Visalberghi, & Call, 2009; Bugnyar, Schwab, Schloegl, & Kotrschal, 2007; Burkart & Heschl, 2006; Cheney & Seyfarth, 2007; Okamoto-Barth, Call, & Tomasello, 2007; Pack & Herman, 2006; Ruiz, Gómez, Roeder, & Byrne, 2008; Tomasello, Call, & Hare, 1998). At least in corvids and primates, appreciating another's line of sight and visual access to information is connected to prediction and decision-making (Bray, Krupenye, & Hare, 2014; Bugnyar & Heinrich, 2005; Flombaum & Santos, 2005; MacLean & Hare, 2012). This richer form of gaze-following is thought to be critical to the development of more sophisticated social-cognitive skills, such as joint attention, language acquisition, and mental state attribution (Baron-Cohen, 1995; Flavell, 1988; Frischen, Bayliss, & Tipper, 2007; Okamoto & Tanaka, 2004; Senju & Csibra, 2008; Tomasello, 1995).

Humans automatically calculate what others see. From at least six years of age, we rapidly and implicitly compute what another person sees even when that information is irrelevant to the task at hand and can be ignored (Samson, Apperly,

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.concog.2016.01.004>

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Braithwaite, Andrews, & Bodley Scott, 2010; Surtees, Apperly, & Samson, 2013; see also Apperly, 2010; Apperly & Butterfill, 2009). This reflexive computation appears to be dissociable from more explicit and effortful mental-state attributions. Given the importance of attending to another's line of sight, it is unsurprising that it occurs rapidly and automatically and may be associated with specialized neural circuitry shared by all primates (for a review of relevant findings, see Shepherd, 2010, pp. 5–6).

It is obvious that what individuals see affects what they know. This obvious truth is reflected in classic philosophical theories of knowledge (Aristotle 350 BCE/1941; Locke 1690/1975) and in the commonsense epistemology of children and adults (O'Neill, Astington & Flavell, 1992; Pillow, 1989; Robinson, Thomas, Parton, & Nye, 1997; Turri, 2014a; Wang, Miletich, Ramsey, & Samson, 2014;). Moreover, explicit knowledge judgments have important social consequences, suggesting that judgments about what someone sees might have similar consequences. Research has shown that knowledge attributions affect several kinds of social evaluation, including moral judgments, decisions about whom to trust, and decisions about when others are pretending (Furrow & Moore, 1990; Moore, Pure, & Furrow, 1990; Schroeder & Linder, 1976; Sobel, 2009; Yuill & Perner, 1988). Indeed, recent results show that knowledge attributions play a uniquely powerful role in normative social cognition, influencing normative evaluations of other people more reliably than attributions of belief, evidence, or certainty (Turri, 2016a; Turri, Friedman, & Keefner, 2016). Moreover, recent results suggest knowledge judgments mediate important effects on how people evaluate decisions based on statistical evidence, including legal and medical decisions (Turri et al., 2016; see also Dawes, Faust, & Meehl, 1989; Wells, 1992).

Although prior research has studied explicit judgments about what others perceive, know, and how they should behave, these judgments have not been studied in relation to one another. For example, two recent studies compared the rate of knowledge attribution to agents who either “look carefully” or “think carefully” in response to a question (Turri, 2014a, 2015b). Whereas looking and thinking were viewed as equally effective in producing knowledge of affirmative propositions (i.e. that something is present or happening), looking was viewed as more effective in producing knowledge of negative propositions (i.e. that something is not present or not happening). Another recent study investigated adults' attitudes about the relative effectiveness of different perceptual modalities to produce knowledge (Wang et al., 2014). Reaction time data suggested that adults think that *looking* is more informative than either *touching* or *lifting*, even when controlling for the appropriateness of sensory modality for acquiring information. In neither of these lines of research did researchers collect judgments about perception or how the agent should act.

In this paper, I report two experiments investigating the relationship among explicit judgments about what others see, know, and should do. As far as I am aware, this is the first research to investigate these three important judgments together. This research will help address at least two connected theoretical questions.

First, some have argued that knowledge functions as the norm of our social practice of assertion (e.g. Turri, 2013, 2014b; Williamson, 2000; see also Craig, 1990). On this view, you should assert something only if you know it is true, and knowledge explains why you should make the assertion. This hypothesis about assertion is supported by observational data connecting assertion to knowledge (Turri, 2011a). We can prompt an assertion by asking whether someone has knowledge (e.g. “Do you know what time it is?”) (Turri, 2010a); when questioned, we can abstain from making an assertion by citing lack of knowledge (e.g. “Sorry, I don't know”) (Reynolds, 2002). And we can challenge an assertion by referencing knowledge (e.g. “Do you really know that?” or “You don't know what you're talking about”) (Unger, 1975).

The hypothesis about assertion is also supported by experimental results. For example, in one study researchers told participants that an agent either believed a true proposition, was certain of a fact, or knew that a proposition was true. Participants who were told that the agent knew were significantly more likely to judge that the agent should make an assertion (Turri et al., 2016; see also Turri, 2016a, 2016b). Another study manipulated whether participants were told that an agent either knows or does not know a proposition. The manipulation dramatically affected whether people judged that the agent should assert the proposition: people strongly judged that the agent should make the assertion when she knew, but they strongly judged that she should not make the assertion when she did not know (Turri, 2015a).

Although these and other findings support the hypothesis that knowledge is the norm of assertion, an important alternative hypothesis has not been ruled out. The alternative is that assertability and knowledge have a *common cause*. On this view, there is no single norm of assertion. Instead, there is a variety of norms which license assertion based on information from approved sources, such as vision and other sensory modalities, memory, testimony, and competent inference. Moreover, the alternative continues, knowledge is an additional consequence of information acquired in these ways. For example, suppose an agent looks at a scene and sees that there is a vervet monkey in the tree. In virtue of this, the agent knows that there is a vervet monkey in the tree, and the agent should tell others who are interested in this fact. If this alternative is correct, then knowledge would be a reliable sign of assertability, but it would not be the source of assertability.

Second, cases involving perception in misleading environments are often considered relevant to investigating the norm of assertion. In particular, several theorists have argued that such cases show that knowledge is not the norm of assertion (Brown, 2008; Coffman, 2014; Hill & Schechter, 2007; Lackey, 2007; Smith, 2012; Smithies, 2012). According to this objection, someone who sees that there is a house is fully entitled to assert that there is a house, regardless of whether she happens to be in a highly misleading environment where most things that look like houses are not actually houses (due to, say, recent activity by a film crew constructing an elaborate outdoor set). Nevertheless, the objection continues, being in such an environment prevents the agent from knowing. If this objection is correct, then we should expect competent speakers evaluating such cases to attribute perception and assertability but deny knowledge.

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