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## Success inhibits preschoolers' ability to establish selective trust



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### ABSTRACT

A number of studies have shown that preschoolers make inferences about potential informants based on the informants' past behavior, selectively trusting an informant who has been helpful in the past, for example, over one who has been unhelpful. Here we used a hiding game to show that 4- and 5-year-olds' selective trust can also be influenced by inferences they make about their own abilities. Children do not prefer a previously helpful informant over a previously unhelpful one when informant helpfulness is decoupled from children's success in finding hidden objects (Studies 1 and 3). Indeed, children do not seem to track informant helpfulness when their success at finding hidden objects has never depended on it (Study 2). A single failure to find a hidden object when offered information by the unhelpful informant can, however, lead them to selectively trust the previously helpful one later (Study 4). Children's selective trust is based not only on differences between informants but also on their sense of illusory control—their inferences about whether they need assistance from those informants in the first place.

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### Introduction

Research on selective trust typically focuses on how children evaluate others as sources of information. In the standard paradigm, children take part in several familiarization trials where they are first

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introduced to two informants who vary on some dimension—accuracy (Koenig & Harris, 2005), age (Jaswal & Neely, 2006), confidence (Brosseau-Liard, Cassels, & Birch, 2014; Tenney, Small, Kondrad, Jaswal, & Spellman, 2011), attractiveness (Bascandziew & Harris, 2014), or accent (Kinzler, Corriveau, & Harris, 2011). The question has been whether, on the basis of this brief exposure, children will preferentially seek out and/or endorse new information from one informant over the other (for a review, see Harris, 2012). These familiarization trials are designed to elicit inferences about the knowledge or abilities of the two potential informants. In the studies here, we investigated whether the familiarization trials may also lead children to make inferences about their own abilities and whether these inferences, in turn, affect how likely they are to seek out and selectively trust one informant over the other.

To understand circumstances under which children's selective trust can be influenced by inferences based on their own experiences as well as others' reliability, consider a recent study by Gillis and Nilsen (2013). In this study, on several familiarization trials a dot was hidden under one of a number of differently shaped objects that shared the same color (e.g., red circle, red square, or red triangle). On some trials preschoolers and school-aged children heard an informant give information that was sufficient to locate the dot (e.g., "It's under the square one"), whereas on other trials they heard a different informant give information that was not sufficient (e.g., "It's under the red one"). On each trial children were given the chance to search for the hidden dot. Later they were asked to choose from whom they would like to receive a clue about the location of a newly hidden sticker. Children as young as 4 years tended to choose the informant whose earlier testimony had unambiguously directed them to the location of the hidden dot.

Not surprisingly, most children in Gillis and Nilsen's (2013) study found more hidden dots on familiarization trials featuring the informant whose testimony was unambiguous than on those featuring the informant whose testimony was ambiguous. Thus, their later preference for the formerly unambiguous informant on test trials could have been because she had earlier provided unambiguous information or because children had experienced more success on the familiarization trials on which she was featured. On the basis of a post hoc analysis, Gillis and Nilsen suggested that children in their preschool sample were more attuned to the differences in the success they had experienced earlier with each informant than to the differences in the quality of the information each had provided.

It is also possible that young children's confidence in their ability to solve a task autonomously could influence their selective trust. Suppose, for example, that in a game that involves finding hidden objects, a helpful informant always points to the location where the object is and an unhelpful one always makes ambiguous gestures. If children are lucky enough to find the hidden object regardless of whether the informant is helpful or not, there are at least two possible ways they might respond when given a later opportunity to ask one of the informants for help. They might prefer the formerly helpful informant, which is arguably the most strategic response because, of course, the helpful informant *had* been helpful, whereas the unhelpful one had not; it seems reckless to risk losing out on finding the hidden object if children's lucky streak comes to an end. But another possibility is that children might not show a preference for either informant because over the course of the early trials they may come to believe that they have the skill to succeed at this particular game without help.

Some evidence for this confidence possibility comes from the literature on self-efficacy. Young children often overestimate their own abilities (for a review, see Boseovski, 2010). For example, Stipek and Mac Iver (1989) found that kindergartners and first-graders tended to rate their abilities in the classroom more highly than their teachers rated them. In addition, when children (and adults) make a decision that yields a positive outcome, they sometimes over-attribute that outcome to their own actions, ability, or effort—failing to recognize the contributions of others, for example, or the role of luck or chance (e.g., Metcalfe, Eich, & Castel, 2010; Miller & Ross, 1975). In van Elk, Rutjens, and van der Pligt (2015), elementary school-aged children played a computerized card game, the goal of which was to select from two face-down cards the one with the highest value—truly a game of luck. When children succeeded in selecting the higher value card, they rated themselves as having had more control over the outcome than when they selected the lower value card, a phenomenon known as illusory control. In this situation, children's confidence is misguided because they are involved in a game of chance in which previous success is not indicative of ability or future success.

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