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## Young children's use of honesty as a basis for selective trust



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### ABSTRACT

The ability of 3- to 5-year-old children to reason about trust in relation to the honest behavior of others was examined across five studies (total  $N = 496$ ). Results showed that although 4-year-olds differentiated between honest and dishonest sources in their trust judgments, only 5-year-olds demonstrated a clear capacity to differentiate between honesty and a trust-irrelevant dimension (i.e., cleanliness) in these trust judgments. This was seen in their tendency to trust honest characters more than clean ones and to distrust dishonest characters more than unclean ones. This was also seen in their tendency to choose honest unclean characters over dishonest clean ones in their trust judgments. Results suggest that children use honesty as a basis for selective trust even before they appreciate which specific traits are relevant to trust.

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### Introduction

A central challenge that children face in learning from others is knowing when to accept valid information from others and when to reject information that is incorrect or designed to mislead. Children who incorrectly reject valid information can miss out on valuable learning opportunities, and those who incorrectly accept incorrect or misleading information risk being misinformed or manipulated. The current research focused on children's appreciation that honesty is a crucial characteristic in determining trustworthiness. Because honesty is so central to trust (Bacon, 1999; Tyler, Feldman, &

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Reichert, 2006) and to interpersonal relationships more broadly (Schweitzer, Hershey, & Bradlow, 2006), it is important to understand the developmental origins of the basic recognition that individuals who are dishonest need to be treated more skeptically than individuals who are honest.

People provide inaccurate information due to either their state of knowledge or their intentions. To date, most research on children's selective trust has focused on cases in which participants are given information about the prior behavior of sources and in some cases about their knowledge. Results from this research make it clear that by 4 years of age, if not younger, children place greater trust in informants who have a history of providing accurate information rather than inaccurate information (Birch, Vauthier, & Bloom, 2008; Corriveau & Harris, 2009; Harris, 2007; Jaswal & Neely, 2006; Koenig & Harris, 2005; Koenig & Woodward, 2010) and effectively use a wide range of knowledge-related cues (Birch, Akmal, & Frampton, 2009; Einav & Robinson, 2011; Jaswal, 2006; Nurmsoo & Robinson, 2009; Robinson, Champion, & Mitchell, 1999; Sabbagh & Baldwin, 2001) such as confidence expressed (Birch et al., 2009; Sabbagh & Baldwin, 2001).

There have also been a small number of studies looking at children's judgments about trust where issues of dishonesty come into play (Heyman, Sritanyaratana, & Vanderbilt, 2013; Lane, Wellman, & Gelman, 2013; Mascaro & Sperber, 2009; Vanderbilt, Liu, & Heyman, 2011). Each of these studies provided evidence of substantial development in children's ability to distrust individuals who are dishonest during the preschool years, but children appear to be more competent on some measures than on others. For example, children seem to have more difficulty when they need to infer deception rather than being told about it directly and when they need to make independent evaluations of informants rather than relative ones (see Vanderbilt, Heyman, & Liu, *in press*). In circumstances where participants are directly told of the informant's deceptive tendencies and where they are asked to make relative judgments, even 3-year-olds are capable of indicating that they would rather seek information from an honest character than from a dishonest one (Lane et al., 2013).

Differentiating between honest and dishonest sources is not the only distinction children must be able to make in order to effectively understand the relation between honesty and trust; they also need to understand that honesty has more direct implications for trust than many other personal characteristics such as how strong or how clean someone is. Prior research suggests that even though preschool children make distinctions between different forms of expertise in their judgments about trust (Mills, Legare, Bills, & Mejias, 2010; Sobel & Corriveau, 2010), they may view boundaries between traits as more blurred than do older individuals (Brosseau-Liard & Birch, 2010; Cain, Heyman, & Walker, 1997; Heyman, Gee, & Giles, 2003). For example, 5-year-olds tend to assume that individuals who show evidence of competence are also nice. Prior research also suggests that children may have difficulty in weighing different forms of evidence in their trust judgments such as whether individuals have the appropriate expertise (Landrum, Mills, & Johnson, 2013; Lane et al., 2013). Most directly relevant to the question of whether young children might understand honesty in a trait-specific way is evidence that young children sometimes make trust-relevant judgments based on trust-irrelevant trait information. Indeed, Fusaro, Corriveau, and Harris (2011) found that 3- and 4-year-olds judged informants with relatively greater physical strength to be better sources of information about unknown object labels.

It is possible that the extent to which children differentiate between trust-relevant and trust-irrelevant traits may depend on whether the traits in question are positive or negative. Although there is no specific reason to think that there might be such a difference in this particular honesty-relevant context, it is clear that children sometimes make different social inferences depending on whether they are considering positive or negative information. Young children often show positivity biases in which they require less evidence to reach a positive conclusion about someone than to reach a negative conclusion (Boseovski, 2010; Boseovski, Chiu, & Marcovitch, 2013; Boseovski & Lee, 2006). However, other work suggests that children may view negative information about people as having broader implications than positive information when selecting between potential sources of information: Koenig and Jaswal (2011) found that participants deferred to dog experts on questions about dog names but not on questions about artifact names (see also Lutz & Keil, 2002), yet they expected informants who demonstrated ignorance about dogs to be ignorant about both dog names and artifact names.

The five studies discussed in this article concern what strategy children might be using once they conclude that dishonest behavior has negative implications for trust. Of specific interest is whether

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