



Children's use of informant opinion for cultural practices

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Introduction

At an early age, children use social categories such as race to guide their preferences for novel objects or activities (Shutts, Banaji, & Spelke, 2010).

Children also draw on expertise to learn novel information (Boseovski & Thurman, 2014; Keil, Stein, Webb, Billings, & Rozenblit, 2008). For example, 3- to 5-year-olds are more likely to endorse information from a zookeeper rather than a maternal figure when learning about an unfamiliar animal (Boseovski & Thurman, 2014).

We examined whether 3- to 7-year-olds rely on an expert informant to learn novel cultural information (i.e., a directly knowledgeable Samoan child who observes Samoan cultural practice) or instead defer to a same-race informant with indirect cultural knowledge (i.e., a child who learned about Samoan culture).

We expected that an in-group affiliation would lead to endorsement of a same-race informant despite the informant's lack of direct experience with Samoan culture. With increasing age, this was expected to weaken due to greater sensitivity to culturally privileged knowledge. Alternatively, older children might have particularly strong in-group biases that interfere with the acceptance of information from an unfamiliar other.

We also investigated whether cognitive flexibility predicted participants' endorsement of the the Samoan informant. Greater flexibility may enable children to override pre-existing preferences for same-race individuals.

Method

70 3- to 7-year-olds were shown illustrations of two gender-matched informants that differed in group status: same-race (in-group) versus Samoan (out-group); see Figure 1. Then, participants heard information about the informants' background and familiarity with a Samoan practice (artwork named "siapo,"); see Figure 1.

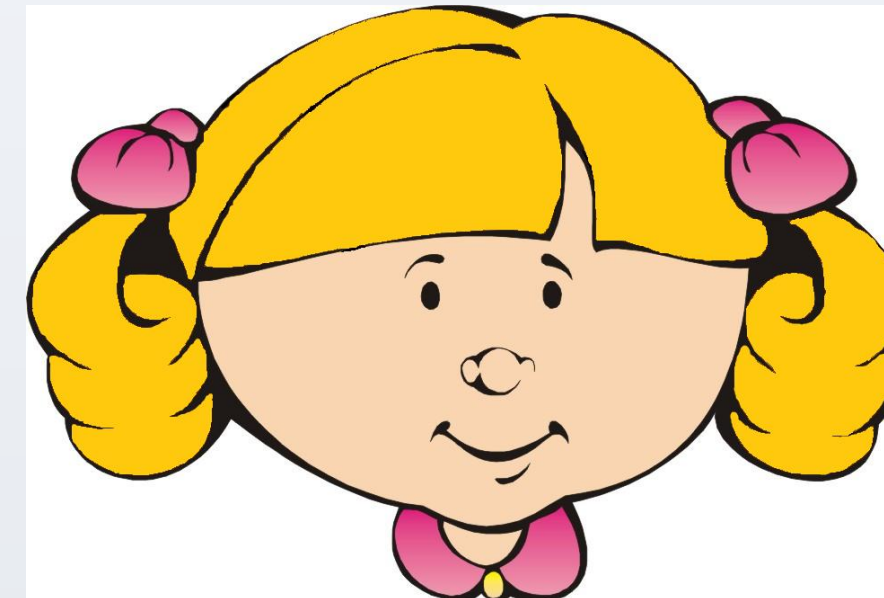
Participants were asked a Correctness question:

"Who do you think is right about how to make siapo?"

Participants were given a score of 0 for choosing the same-race informant and 1 for choosing the Samoan informant.

Participants also completed the Dimensional Change Card Sort - Border Version (DCCS-Borders; Zelazo, 2006). In this task, children complete a set of trials sorting picture cards by either color or shape. If they successfully complete this trial set, children sort the next set by the opposite dimension. If children complete the second set successfully, they then move on to a third set in which they must sort cards with a border by color and cards without a border by shape.

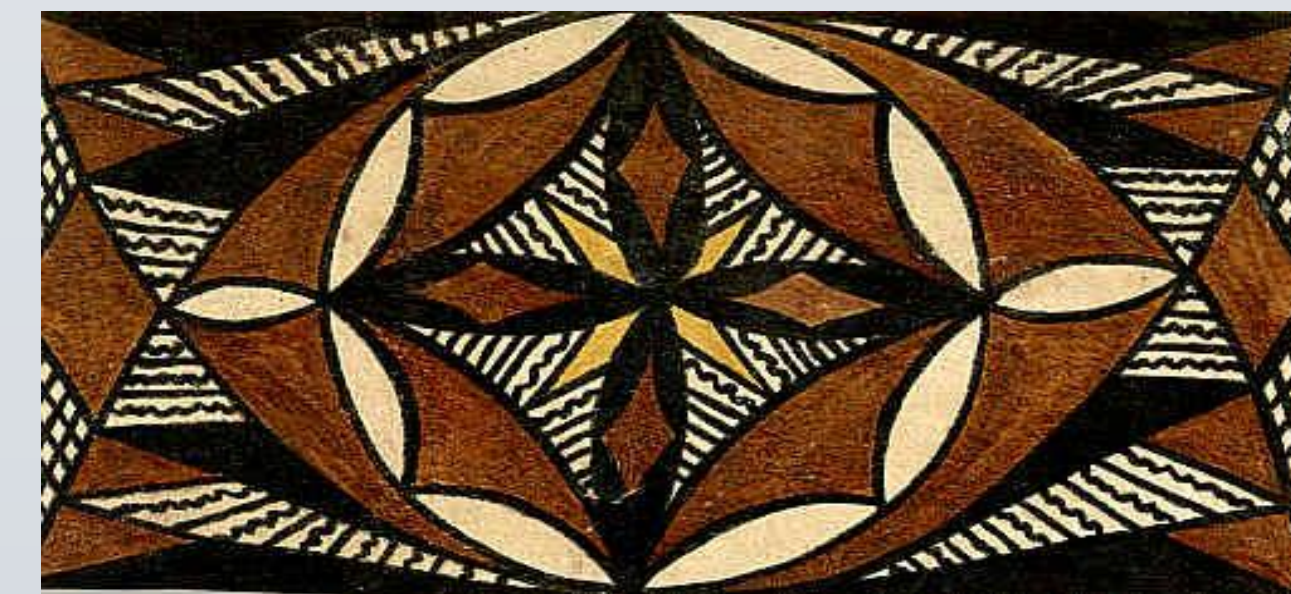
Figure 1. Sample story and Stimuli



"This is Katie. Katie is a girl your age. Katie is from around here and she dresses in regular clothes, just like you. Katie grew up in a house like yours and she went to a school that is like yours. Katie learned about Samoan art from watching a special art T.V. program."



"This is Alea. Alea is also a girl your age, but Alea is not from around here, and she dresses like the people from where she lives. Alea grew up in a different kind of house and she went to a different kind of school. Alea learned about Samoan art from watching her mom and grandmom make Samoan art."



"Katie looks at this picture of Siapo and says that it is a rug made out of cloth like her shirt."

Alea looks at this picture of Siapo and says that it is a blanket made from tree bark."

Results

Logistic regression analyses on the Correctness question with age and gender as predictors indicated a significant main effect of age ($\beta = -.90$, $Wald = 4.48$, $p = .03$) and gender ($\beta = 1.24$, $Wald = 5.39$, $p = .02$) that was qualified by an age x gender interaction ($\beta = 1.06$, $Wald = 3.75$, $p = .05$).

There were no significant gender differences in the responses of younger children ($p > .10$), whereas there were significant differences for the older children ($p < .01$). Older boys were more likely than expected by chance to choose the same-race informant ($p < .01$), while older girls responded unsystematically.

As a group, younger children were more likely than expected by chance to choose the Samoan informant as correct, whereas older children were more likely than expected by chance to choose the same-race informant as correct ($ps < .05$; see Figure 2).

Selection of the Samoan informant was associated with poorer performance on the DCCS-Borders task, $r(68) = -.270$, $p = .025$.

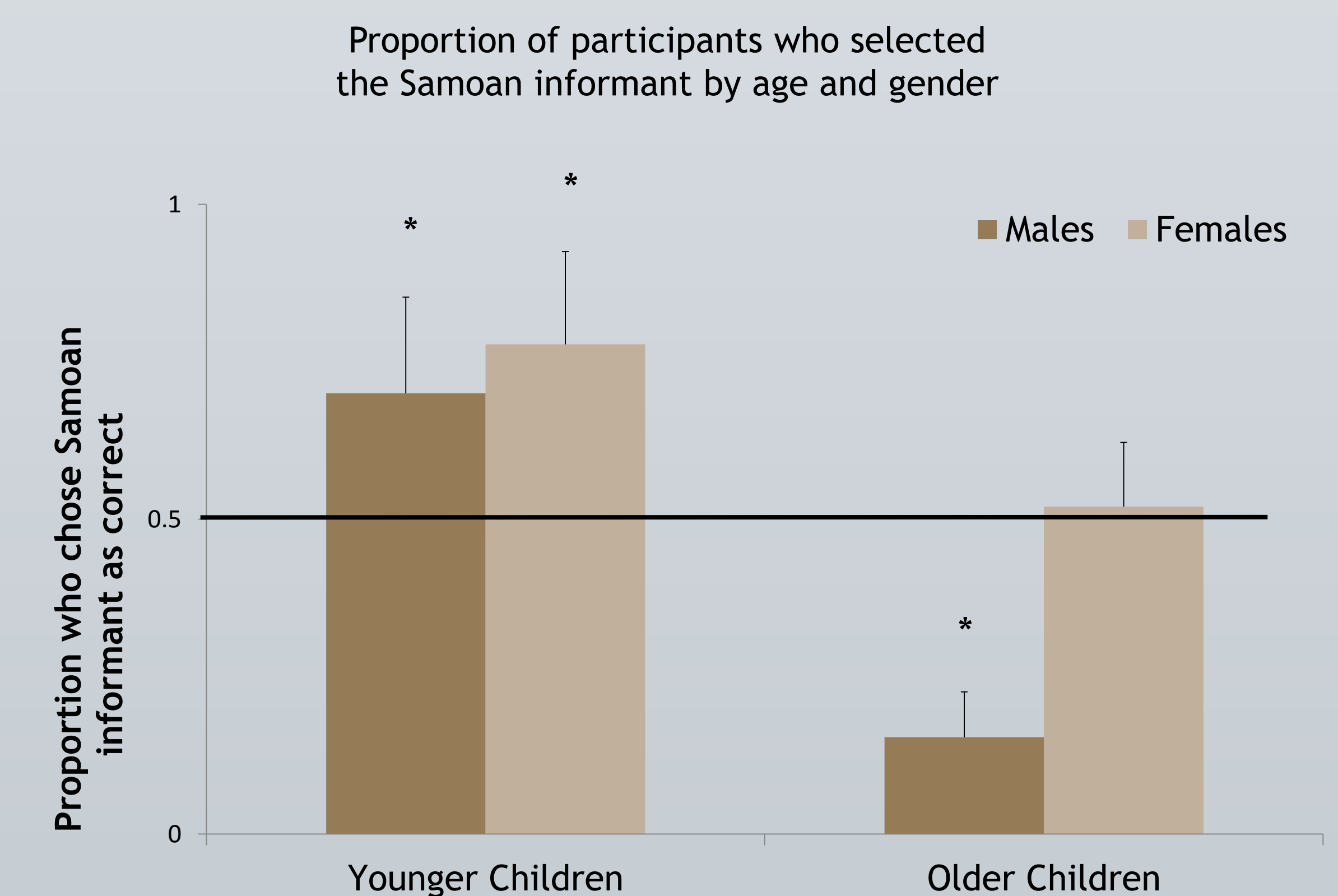
Discussion

Surprisingly, younger children were more likely than older children to endorse the expert (i.e., Samoan informant). This is consistent with previous research in which younger children showed a greater willingness than older children to accept expert testimony about a novel animal (Boseovski & Thurman, 2014). Here, we extend these findings to cultural learning. With age, perceptually salient social category information appears to interfere with acknowledgement of expertise (Bigler, Jones, & Lobliner, 1997; Bigler & Liben, 2007).

Older boys were particularly reluctant to endorse the Samoan informant. One potential interpretation of this finding is that these boys were less tolerant of the Samoan informant because he engaged in somewhat gender-stereotypical behavior (e.g., observing his mother and grandmother make art; wearing a headdress and necklace). With increasing age, boys show increased sensitivity to gender stereotypes (Blakemore, 2003; Schuette & Killen, 2009).

Contrary to our prediction, greater cognitive flexibility was associated with selection of the same-race informant rather than the Samoan informant. It is possible that participants with lower cognitive flexibility benefitted from limitations in the ability to switch between multiple representations (i.e., race and knowledge status) and focused exclusively on the salient verbal information about expertise. In contrast, children with greater cognitive flexibility may have found it more difficult to focus on the expertise information due to competition from a potent racial/in-group representation. Additional investigation is needed to understand the relation between cognitive flexibility and children's perception of cultural information.

Figure 2.



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