“Because she’s native”: Children’s use of expertise to learn about novel cultural information

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Introduction

- Children evaluate others’ expertise to decide who is knowledgeable (e.g., Danovitch & Keil, 2004). For example, children use expertise information to infer functions and names for novel machines (e.g., Sobel & Corriveau, 2010) and to decide whether unfamiliar animals are dangerous (e.g., Boseovski & Thurman, 2014).
- Children are sensitive to cultural differences and often display an in-group bias (e.g., Bigler & Liben, 2007), but little research has examined how children’s evaluations of expertise are influenced by perceptions of cultural group membership.
- In a novel cultural context, children may prioritize the familiarity of an in-group informant or they may defer to the expertise of an informant immersed in the target culture.
- Children also have personal experience learning from people (Harris, 2012; Rogoff, 2014) and from books (Freeman, 2014; Wells & Zeece, 2007). Perceptions of these learning methods may influence children’s evaluations of experts who gained knowledge either from a person or from a book.
- We examined the degree to which 6- to 9-year-olds use cultural immersion (i.e., in-group, not immersed in target culture vs. out-group, immersed in target culture) and informant learning method (i.e., immersed-person and non-immersed-book vs. immersed-book and non-immersed-person) to evaluate expertise for novel cultural practices.

Method

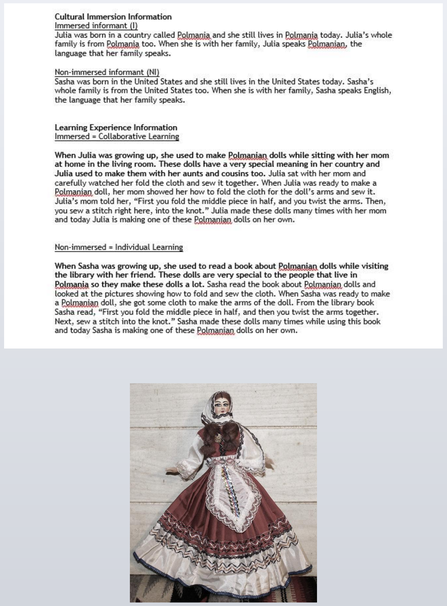
- 96 6- to 9-year-olds participated in the study.
- Participants heard two stories about a culturally non-immersed informant (i.e., in-group, American) and an immersed informant (e.g., out-group, “Polmanian”) who each had expertise for a novel cultural practice (e.g., “Polmanian” doll-sewing); see Figure 1.
- Informant learning method for the cultural practice was manipulated: from a person vs. from a book.
- Participants were asked two questions:

“Who would (perform cultural practice) better?” (Correctness question)

“If you wanted to learn how to (perform cultural practice), who would you want to learn from?” (Future learning preference question)

- Participants were given a score of 0 for choosing the non-immersed informant and a score of 1 for choosing the immersed informant (range: 0-2).
- Participants were asked how much they liked each informant: 1 star (not very much), 2 stars (a little), 3 stars (a lot).

Figure 1. Sample story and stimuli



Cultural Immersion Information
Immersed informant (I)
Julia was born in a country called Polmania and she still lives in Polmania today. Julia’s whole family is from Polmania too. When she is with her family, Julia speaks Polmanian, the language that her family speaks.

Non-immersed informant (NI)
Sasha was born in the United States and she still lives in the United States today. Sasha’s whole family is from the United States too. When she is with her family, Sasha speaks English, the language that her family speaks.

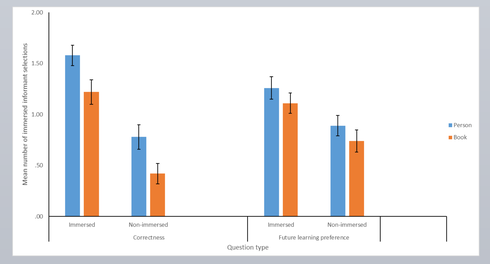
Learning Experience Information
Immersed = Collaborative Learning

When Julia was growing up, she used to make Polmanian dolls while sitting with her mom at home in the living room. These dolls have a very special meaning in her country and Julia used to make them with her aunts and cousins too. Julia sat with her mom and carefully watched her fold the cloth and sew it together. When Julia was ready to make a Polmanian doll, her mom showed her how to fold the cloth for the doll’s arms and sew it. Julia’s mom told her, “First you fold the middle piece in half, and you twist the arms. Then, you sew a stitch right here, into the knot.” Julia made these dolls many times with her mom and today Julia is making one of these Polmanian dolls on her own.

Non-immersed = Individual Learning

When Sasha was growing up, she used to read a book about Polmanian dolls while visiting the library with her friend. These dolls are very special to the people that live in Polmania so they make these dolls a lot. Sasha read the book about Polmanian dolls and looked at the pictures showing how to fold and sew the cloth. When Sasha was ready to make a Polmanian doll, she got some cloth to make the arms of the doll. From the library book Sasha read, “First you fold the middle piece in half, and then you twist the arms together. Next, sew a stitch into the knot.” Sasha made these dolls many times while using this book and today Sasha is making one of these Polmanian dolls on her own.

Figure 2. Children’s selection of immersed informant by question type and informant learning method



Results

- ***Did children prioritize familiarity (i.e., in-group membership) or defer to cultural immersion (i.e., out-group membership)?***

As a group, participants endorsed the immersed informant as correct significantly more often than expected by chance, $t(95) = 5.22$, $p < .001$.

Younger children: $M = 1.23$, $SD = 0.80$, $t(46) = 2.37$, $p = 0.02$; Older children: $M = 1.53$, $SD = 0.71$, $t(48) = 5.23$, $p < .001$.

As a group, participants also endorsed the immersed informant for future learning significantly more often than expected by chance, $t(95) = 2.47$, $p = 0.02$.

This future learning finding was driven by older children, $M = 1.33$, $SD = 0.75$, $t(48) = 3.06$, $p = 0.004$; Younger children: $M = 1.04$, $SD = 0.72$, $t(46) = 0.41$, $p = 0.69$.

Overall, children did not demonstrate an in-group bias and instead reported liking both informants a moderate amount: immersed, $M = 2.21$, $SD = 0.63$; non-immersed, $M = 2.24$, $SD = 0.59$.

- ***Did children’s perceptions of learning method influence their decisions?***

There was a synergistic effect of cultural immersion and informant learning method: Participants who heard about an immersed-person informant were more likely to endorse the immersed informant as correct ($M = 1.58$, $SD = 0.70$) than those who heard about an immersed-book informant ($M = 1.22$, $SD = 0.79$); see Figure 2.

Discussion

- In contrast to previous research in which children demonstrated an in-group bias (see Bigler & Liben, 2007), 6- to 9-year-olds in a novel cultural context recognized cultural immersion as inherently helpful. This finding suggests that this type of cultural context may influence children’s social judgments differently from some previous social learning paradigms.
- Older children were particularly keen to evaluate cultural immersion as more beneficial than familiarity in this context. In contrast, younger children’s endorsement of the immersed informant for future learning suggests that they were implicitly reluctant to affiliate with an out-group member. This question may have prompted children to reflect on the consequences of out-group affiliation (Boseovski, Hughes, & Miller, 2016).
- Future investigation of the synergistic effect of cultural immersion and learning method might include scenarios with informants who share cultural immersion but differ in learning method and vice versa.

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