Trait or Testimony? Children's Trust in Informants' Evaluative Judgments

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Introduction

In early to middle childhood, children show a positivity bias in information processing that is characterized by a tendency to judge others favorably even when such judgments are unsubstantiated (e.g., Boseovski, 2010; Stipek & Daniels, 1990).

Among a number of domains, positivity biases are reflected in children's selective learning. Children prefer to learn from informants who are nice (over those who are mean; e.g., Lane, Wellman, & Gelman, 2013) irrespective of whether such trait information is relevant. Children also trust informants who provide positive evaluative content in their speech (over negative content; Boseovski, 2012).

Previous research has examined the impact of positive traits and positive testimony on social learning independently. In contrast, it is unknown whether children privilege positive traits or positive speech content for learning and friendship preferences when both of these options are available.

We examined 4- to 8-year-olds' endorsements and affiliation preferences when presented with a nice informant who provided a negative evaluation of a peer's painting and a mean informant who provided a positive evaluation of a peer's painting.

Method

Children 4 to 8 years of age (N=123) were shown a photo of a girl with an easel and told that she painted a picture. Next, they were introduced to two informants who differed in both their traits and evaluations of the peer's painting. One informant was labeled as nice and said that the peer's painting was very bad (i.e., nice, negative) and the other informant was labeled as mean and said that the peer's painting was very good (i.e., mean, positive). See Figure 1.

Participants were then asked about their preferences in different domains. Children were asked an Endorsement Question, "Who do you think is right about the painting?" and an Affiliation Question, "Who would you rather be friends with?"

Preference for the nice, negative informant was assigned a score of 0. Preference of the mean, positive informant was assigned a score of 1.

References

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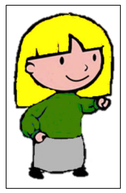
Boseovski, J. J. (2012). Trust in testimony about strangers: Young children prefer reliable informants who make positive attributions. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, *111*(3), 543-551.

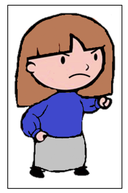
Lane, J. D., Wellman, H. M., & Gelman, S. A. (2013). Informants' traits weigh heavily in young children's trust in testimony and in their epistemic inferences. *Child Development*, *84*(4), 1253-1268.

Stipek, D. J., & Daniels, D. H. (1990). Children's use of dispositional attributions in predicting the performance and behavior of classmates. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, *11*(1), 13-28.

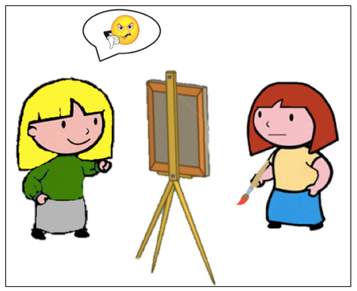
Figure 1: Sample Stimuli and Stories



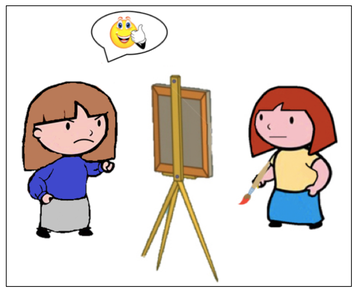
"This is Colleen. Colleen is really nice."



"This is Amy. Amy is really mean."

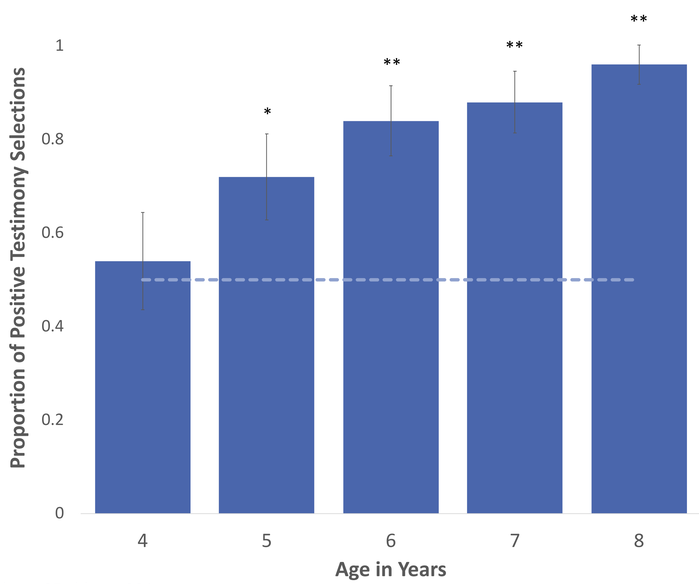


"Colleen looks at the painting done by Mary and says it looks very bad."



"Amy looks at the painting done by Mary and says it looks very good."

Figure 2: Mean Endorsement of Positive Testimony by Age



*p < .05. **p < .001.

Results

Logistic regression analyses of the contribution of standardized age in months as the independent variable were conducted on the Endorsement and Affiliation responses as dichotomous dependent variables.

The overall model was significant for Endorsement, $\chi^2(1, N= 123)= 13.77$, $p< .001$, Nagelkerke $R^2= .17$. There was a significant effect of age (ß= 1.02, *Wald*= 11.35, $p= .001$), such that older children endorsed positive testimony more than younger children. Children relied on positive testimony in their endorsements more often than would be expected by chance, $t(122)= 7.81$, $p< .001$.

Age differences were also examined categorically; all age groups systematically endorsed positive testimony with the exception of 4-year-olds, $t(23)= .40$, $p= .692$. See Figure 2 for means by age.

The overall model was not significant for Affiliation, $\chi^2(1, N= 121)= .06$, $p= .808$, Nagelkerke $R^2= .00$. There was no significant effect of age, (ß= -.05, *Wald*= .06, $p= .808$). A two-tailed t-test against chance revealed that children affiliated with the nice informant more often than would be expected by chance, $t(120)= -2.51$, $p= .013$.

Discussion

Prior work has found that children rely on positive testimony information to a greater extent than other valuable information, such as reliability, in their endorsements (e.g., Boseovski, 2012). In the current study, the importance of positive evaluative content in children's endorsements held even when there was information about informants' benevolence. As positivity biases increase in middle childhood, so does skepticism toward negative feedback that conflicts with these positive expectations.

Conversely, children showed preference for positive trait information in their affiliation preferences. This suggests that positive traits and speech are valued differently based on the domain. In a relatively greater epistemic domain, children endorse positive testimony as correct, but in a more social domain, children pursue friendships with those who are nice.

What remains unclear is whether children's endorsements of positive testimony reflect a preference for positive testimony, an avoidance of negative testimony, or mix of the two. Future research could focus on children's justifications for their choice. Further, it would be valuable to manipulate contextual information, such as objectivity of positive and negative judgments, to examine the impact of context on children's endorsement and affiliation preferences.