Is “same as me” always better?
Children’s evaluations of novel cultural information provided by in-group and out-group informants

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Introduction

Children are sensitive to social category differences (Bigler & Liben, 2007; Dunham, Baron, & Banaji, 2008) and use these differences to make inferences about unfamiliar and familiar people (i.e., out-group vs. in-group, respectively; see Rhodes & Chalik, 2013).

Children are prone to an in-group bias when these differences are made salient (Bigler & Liben, 2007), but with age, in-group bias declines (e.g., Aboud, 2008).

We examined whether younger children (i.e., 3-year-olds) and older children (7- to 8-year-olds) prioritize relevant cultural status (Samoan) or in-group status to learn about a novel cultural practice (i.e., “siapo”). In-group bias declines among 7- to 10-year-olds (Aboud, 2008), which might allow older children to endorse the claim of an unfamiliar but culturally knowledgeable informant (i.e., Samoan) more readily than younger children.

We expected that older children would be more likely than younger children to endorse the claim of the Samoan informant as correct because some research suggests that asking children who is “right” prompts an immediate response that is more prone to bias (Boseovski, Hughes, & Miller, 2016; Ma & Woolley, 2013) to which younger children might be vulnerable.

We also anticipated that asking children which informant they would want to learn Samoan art from could prompt children to consider who they might have to affiliate with to do so. In that case, we expected that younger children would be less likely than older children to want to affiliate with the Samoan informant because this question may prompt reflection about the consequences of affiliation (Boseovski et al., 2016; Ma & Woolley, 2013) with an out-group member.

Method

Thirty 3-year-olds and 35 7- to 8-year-olds were introduced to two gender-matched informants that differed by cultural status: in-group (same-race) versus out-group (Samoan).

Then, participants heard about each informant’s background and familiarity with a Samoan cultural practice (i.e., “siapo,” a type of art); see Figure 1.

Participants were asked a correctness question, “Who do you think is right about how you make siapo?” and a future learning preference question, “If you wanted to learn how to make siapo, who would you want to learn from?”

Participants received a score of 0 for choosing the in-group informant and a score of 1 for choosing the Samoan informant.

Figure 1. Sample story and Stimuli

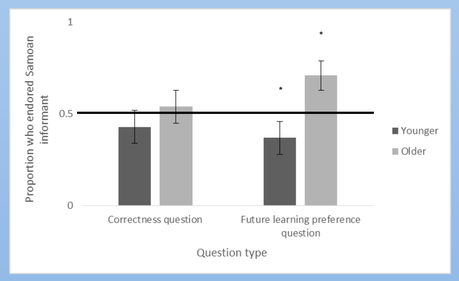
“This is Kevin. Kevin is a boy your age. Kevin is from around here and he dresses in regular clothes, just like you. Kevin grew up in a house like yours and he went to a school that is like yours. Kevin learned about Samoan art from watching a special art T.V. program.”

“This is Etano. Etano is also a boy your age, but Etano is not from around here, and he dresses like the people from where he lives. Etano grew up in a different kind of house and he went to a different kind of school. Etano learned about Samoan art from watching his mom and grand-mom make Samoan art.”

“Kevin looks at this picture of Siapo and says that it is a rug made out of cloth like his shirt.

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

Figure 2. Proportion of participants who endorsed Samoan informant by age and question type



Results

For the future learning preference question, older children endorsed the Samoan informant significantly more than younger children, $t(63)= 2.95$, $p = .004$, and significantly above chance, $M = 0.71$, $SD = 0.46$, $t(34) = 2.77$, $p = 0.01$. Younger children’s endorsements did not differ significantly from chance, $M = 0.37$, $SD = 0.49$, $t(29) = 1.49$, $p = 0.15$.

For the correctness question, neither older children, $M = 0.54$, $SD = 0.51$, $t(34) = 0.50$, $p > .01$, nor younger children, $M = 0.43$, $SD = 0.50$, $t(29)= 0.72$, $p > .01$, endorsed either informant systematically.

Discussion

As children acquire general social acumen (Nesdale, 2013) and exposure to members of unfamiliar groups, they may become more familiar with how social category-based identities are connected to what other people know. In middle childhood, children might capitalize on their early sensitivity to differentiate between members of social categories (e.g., Dunham et al., 2008) to infer whether an informant has an advantage in cultural knowledge based on their cultural status.

When asked about their future learning preferences, the responses of younger children, but not older children, could be interpreted as evidence of an in-group bias. This finding supports the finding that an in-group bias declines with age (Aboud, 2008). Younger children could have relied more on background information from the study that emphasized the familiarity of the same-race informant (e.g., “grew up in a house like yours”), activating an in-group bias (Bigler & Liben, 2007).

It is clear that the two different question types elicited different patterns of responses, but future research could disentangle whether these responses are due to children’s reflection about consequences (e.g., Boseovski et al., 2016) and reflect social biases, or whether other factors contribute to these different responses. For example, when reasoning about the future preschoolers have difficulty thinking about resources that they might need to complete a future task (e.g., Atance, Louw, & Clayton, 2015). Additionally, children may not think that there “right” and “wrong” answers to questions in a cultural domain as there might be for more familiar topics, such as math.

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