Do Children Always Trust Confident Individuals? Not When it Comes to Moral Dilemmas and Subjective Opinions

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Introduction

- Children often treat confident individuals as more credible sources of information, which makes sense when factual information is the domain of knowledge in question (Birch et al. 2010; Brosseau-Liard & Birch, 2010; Brosseau-Liard et al. 2014).
- Hesitancy may reflect a deeper level of thoughtfulness, and thus, credibility, when addressing moral dilemmas or subjective opinions.
- This study determined how children assess credibility in speakers varying in their level of confidence (confident vs. hesitant) in three different domains of knowledge (factual vs. moral vs. subjective).

Method

Participants: 84 children ages 6 to 8
Dilemma phase: 8 different stories

Factual condition: Which of these animals is the most intelligent?
Moral condition: Which of these animals should get a prize for being so helpful?
Subjective condition: Which of these animals is the nicest?

Confident speaker: Not the elephant, not the parrot. The dolphin, definitely the dolphin!
Unconfident speaker: Maybe the elephant, maybe the parrot, maybe the dolphin?

Measures: After each speakers response, children were then asked four different questions:
A. How confident was she?
B. Did you like her?
C. Is she smart?
D. Do you agree with her answer?

Results

- No differences were found in how the hesitant person is interpreted across all conditions (p > 0.10).
- Differences were seen in how participants rate the confident person in moral and factual condition.

Discussion and Conclusion

- Children prefer to learn from confident sources over hesitant sources when learning new facts but do not have this preference when being provided subjective information or an opinion on a moral dilemma.
- Being confident or answering quickly when it’s a matter of opinion or in a high stakes moral situation seems to undermine one’s credibility.
- This research sheds light on the remarkable level of sophistication with which children are able to evaluate informants.

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