

The Role of Gossip in Young Children's Selective Learning from Others



Early Childhood Cognition Lab

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Introduction

Young children selectively learn from others. They attend to various cues for the trustworthiness of potential informants (e.g., Fusaro & Harris, 2008; Kinzler, Corriveau, & Harris, 2011; Koenig, Clement, & Harris, 2004).

No studies have yet examined the role of gossip in young children's selective learning from others.

About 2/3 of adult conversations are about social topics, most of which is gossip with either positive or negative valence (e.g., Dunbar, 1996).

Even children devote a significant amount of their conversation time to gossip (e.g., Engel & Li, 2004).

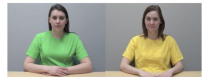
The present study aims to explore whether young children are able to use reputational information transmitted through gossip to guide their information seeking.

Method

Participants: 4- and 5-year-olds ($N = 96$, 48 at each age)

Mixed design: Each child was randomly assigned to one of three conditions (between-subjects) and received 2 types of test trials (within-subjects).

Procedure (using PowerPoint presentations):



- **Introduction phase:** The child was introduced to two informants who were matched in terms of ethnicity and physical appearance.

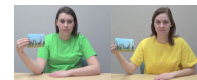


- **Gossip phase:** The child watched a video of 2 people gossiping about the target informant. A memory check was performed with the child identifying the target and the content of the gossip.

- **Positive condition:** The gossipers talk about how the target is really good at telling people what things are called.
- **Negative condition:** The gossipers talk about how the target is really bad at telling people what things are called.
- **Control condition:** The gossipers talk about why the target is absent from work.

• Test phase:

- 4 **novel-label** trials: The child was asked from whom they would like to learn the name of a novel entity, the target or the non-target informant.
- A second memory check was performed.
- 4 **novel-fact** trials: The child was asked from whom they would like to learn a novel fact, the target or the non-target informant.



Results

The effect of condition is significant, $F(2, 90) = 21.24, p < .001$.

- Choosing the target: Positive > Control > Negative condition

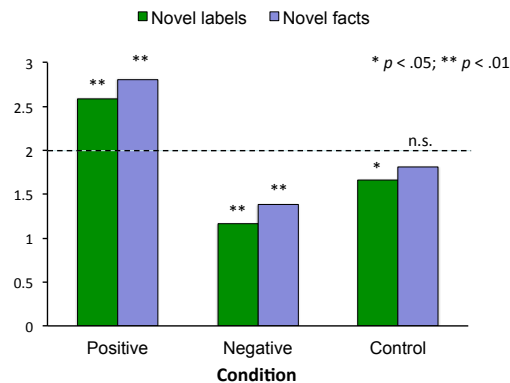
The effect of trial type is also significant, $F(1, 90) = 4.05, p = .047$.

- Choosing the target: Novel-fact trials > Novel-label trials

When performance is **compared to chance expectation**:

- **Positive condition:** A significant preference for the target
- **Negative condition:** A significant avoidance of the target
- **Control condition:** A significant avoidance of the target on the novel-label trials, but random responses on the novel-fact trials.

Mean Number of Choosing the Target Informant



Discussion

This study provides the first evidence that 4- and 5-year-olds are able to use reputational information transmitted through gossip to guide their selective learning from others.

- When the gossip content was positive, they preferred to seek novel information from the target of gossip.
- When the gossip content was negative, they avoided seeking novel information from the target of gossip.

Children generalize their impressions of the target of gossip as a source of information in one domain to another domain.

- Despite the gossip content being specific about the target's (in)competence in labeling things, children showed the same patterns of selective learning on both novel-label and novel-fact trials.

Gossip can serve as an important means of culture learning for children (Baumeister et al., 2004).

An ongoing study is examining the effect of gossip concerning character traits on young children's selective learning from others.

Future work will manipulate the source of gossip (e.g., from a single gossiper vs. multiple gossipers).

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