

Young Children's Trust in the Testimony of Physically Disabled or Obese Individuals



Introduction

Children largely rely on the testimony of others for information that cannot be acquired through direct experiences (e.g., Harris 2007).

Past research shows that children assess different factors (e.g., past reliability, bystander approval, social category) when deciding whom to trust (e.g., Fusaro & Harris, 2008; Koenig, Clement, & Harris, 2004; Ma & Woolley, 2013).

There is evidence that children's perception of the physically disabled may be mixed (e.g., Dyson, 2005), whereas their perception of overweight individuals is generally negative (e.g., Su & Di Santo, 2012).

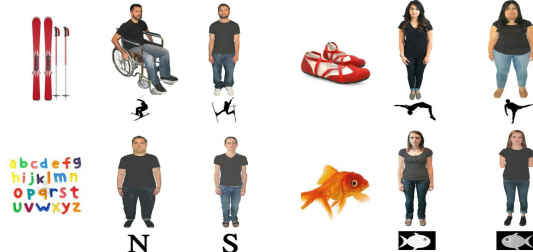
However, no studies have yet examined children's trust in the testimony of individuals with physical disabilities or obesity. The present study aims to address this question.

Study 1

Participants: 4- and 5-year-olds ($N = 40$, 20 at each age)

Procedure (using PowerPoint presentations):

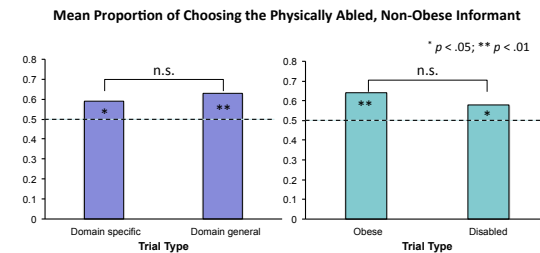
- Each child was provided with conflicting testimony about a novel physical activity or fact from two informants – physically abled, non-obese vs. obese (“obese” trials), or physically abled, non-obese vs. physically disabled (“disabled” trials).
- The child was asked to endorse the testimony of only one informant.



Within-subjects design: Each child received 4 trials involving novel physical activities (domain specific; 2 obese, 2 disabled) and 4 trials involving novel facts (domain general; 2 obese, 2 disabled).

Results:

- Children responded similarly across domain-specific and domain-general trials, and across obese and disabled trials.
- Overall children were more likely to endorse the testimony of the physically abled, non-obese informants (as compared to chance expectations).



- On the trials involving novel facts, children with prior exposure to obese individuals preferred the testimony of obese informants ($t = 2.75$, $p = .011$, as compared to chance).

Study 2

Study 1 indicated that children had an overall preference for the testimony of physically abled, non-obese informants.

Study 2 examined the robustness of this bias, by looking at if children continue to endorse the testimony of physically abled, non-obese informants who are shown to be previously unreliable.

Participants: 4- and 5-year-olds ($N = 40$, 20 at each age)

Procedure: Each child received the 4 trials involving novel physical activities from Study 1, except for one critical change:

- Before each test trial, the child was shown that the physically abled, non-obese informant was unreliable (e.g., providing inaccurate labels for familiar objects).



Results:

- Children responded randomly, without showing a significant preference for either informant.
 - Obese trials: $M = .41$, n.s.; Disabled trials: $M = .49$, n.s.

Discussion

In line with previous research on children's perceptions of physically disabled or obese individuals, 4- and 5-year-olds in Study 1 showed a positive bias toward the testimony of physically abled, non-obese informants.

Children responded similarly across trials involving both novel physical activities (i.e., directly related to the physical characteristics of the informants) and novel facts (i.e., domain general), which may be explained by a “halo effect”.

Study 2 indicated that past unreliability might cancel out the bias toward the physically abled, non-obese informants, but could not trump it.

Future work will examine whether physically disabled or obese children would show a similar bias as the children in Study 1. It is also worth further examining the role of prior exposure to disabled or obese others in children's trust in testimony.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the parents and children for their participation.

Special thanks to the Ontario Science Centre (KidSpark) and the participating daycares/preschools for their generous support.

This work was supported by a SSHRC Insight Development Grant to Lili Ma.

References

Dyson, L. L. (2005). Kindergarten children's understanding of and attitudes toward people with disabilities. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education, 25*(2), 95-105.

Fusaro, M., & Harris, P. L. (2008). Children assess informant reliability using bystanders' non-verbal cues. *Developmental Science, 11*(5), 771-777.

Harris, P. L. (2007). Trust. *Developmental Science, 10*(1), 135-138.

Koenig, M. A., Clément, F., & Harris, P. L. (2004). Trust in testimony: Children's use of true and false statements. *Psychological Science, 15*(10), 694-698.

Ma, L., & Woolley, J. D. (2013). Young children's sensitivity to speaker gender when learning from others. *Journal of Cognition and Development, 14*(1), 100-119.

Su, W., & Di Santo, A. (2012). Preschool children's perceptions of overweight peers. *Journal of Early Childhood Research, 10*(1), 19-31.