Sometimes Hesitancy is Key: Effects of Moral Deliberations on Children's Interpretation of Credibility Cues

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Introduction

Children often treat confident individuals as more credible sources of information [1-5]. Yet, confidence may differentially signify credibility depending upon the type (or domain) of knowledge. For example,

- When dealing with novel factual information, confident responses indicate greater credibility.
- However, when deliberating about moral issues, hesitancy may reflect a deeper level of thoughtfulness, and therefore credibility.

This study investigated children’s credibility judgments of individuals who differed in the level of confidence (confident vs. hesitant) in two domains of knowledge (factual, moral).

Method

Participants: N=82, 3-8 years (M = 5.26; 52.4% female) in three age groups: 3-4, 5-6, 7-8 years.

Design: Domain

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factual or Moral</th>
<th>Confidence Level</th>
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<tr>
<td>Factual</td>
<td>Confident and Hesitant</td>
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Procedure

Sample Questions

Factual
Which of these animals is the only one that has no Toma (novel fact)?

Moral
A seal, sea otter, and sea lion are all really hungry, but there is only one piece of shrimp left. Who should get the food?

Sample Responses

Confident Speaker: Not the sea lion, not the seal. The otter! Definitely the otter.

Hesitant Speaker: Maybe the sea lion, maybe the seal, maybe the otter... Ok I guess the otter.

Measures

Across 8 trials, children rated the model on a 4-point scale (0=not at all, 1=a little, 2=a medium amount, 3=a lot) in terms of:

- Model’s level of confidence (confidence)
- How much they liked him (liking)
- How smart she is (smartness)
- How much they agreed with her answer (agreement)

Results

Children judged the confident model higher in the factual domain, whereas they penalized that same confidence in the moral domain.

Confidence: Across conditions, children rated the confident model as significantly more confident than the hesitant model (Fig. 1). In addition, children’s ratings of the models’ confidence level became more extreme with age (i.e., confident model was even more confident, hesitant model was even less confident).

Likability, Smartness, & Agreement: Children rated the confident model significantly higher in the factual domain in all three categories. However, when presented with confident response in the moral domain that same confident response was penalized significantly and was rated lower in all three categories (Fig. 2-4).

A 2(Confident, Hesitant) x2 (Factual, Moral) x3 (3-4, 5-6, 7-8years) ANOVA was used to obtain these results.

Conclusions & Future Directions

Children differentially interpret confidence as a cue to one’s credibility depending on the domain. That is, children preferred the confident individual when learning factual information, whereas they penalized the individual for it in moral domain.

For moral deliberations, hesitancy may be interpreted as thoughtfulness, whereas confidence may be interpreted as overconfidence or a rush to judgment.

These findings further indicate children’s active role in examining others’ credibility. Children do not blindly use a behavior (i.e., confidence) as an indicator of credibility, rather they critically evaluate one’s trustworthiness given the context.

Future research could include older children (i.e., over 8 years old) or adults, to see if and when they favor the hesitant individual in the moral domain. Future studies could also use a forced-choice design wherein children hear conflicting responses from a confident and a hesitant speaker and must choose between the two.

References


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