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Commentary

The trouble with halos: Invited commentary on Kim, S., & Harris, P. L. (2014). Children prefer to learn from mind-readers. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*

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This commentary on Kim and Harris (2014) addresses the authors' interpretation of the halo effect, in which 5- to 6-year-old children preferentially agreed with an informant who could read other people's minds, regardless of domain of knowledge.

Kim and Harris (2014) found 5- to 6-year-old children were more likely to endorse information provided by an omniscient informant, who 'just knew' the contents of another person's mind, as opposed to a less knowledgeable informant, who needed to be told what another person was thinking about. Some of these older children viewed the omniscient informant as having real magical powers, whereas other children viewed the omniscient informant as only doing a trick. There was no difference in preference for the omniscient informant based on how children viewed the source of the informant's ability.

One the one hand, these findings are consistent with research indicating that children in this age range are attentive to informants' expertise when deciding whom to trust for information (see Woolley & Ghossainy, 2013). The recent body of work on children's selective trust has indicated children in this age range will generally prefer to learn from people who have demonstrated a previous expertise for the task at hand. In this case, Kim and Harris (2014) presented children with a prototypical expert who just knows everything, and unsurprisingly, children reflected their understanding of that characterization of the omniscient informant by preferentially agreeing with that informant's claims.

Kim and Harris (2014) interpret their findings as a developmental explanation for cultural practices related to in the transmission of cultural knowledge, specifically through attributions of authority to priests, shamans, witches, etc. This conclusion is problematized when considering that children in this age range are selective about the information they transfer from fantasy stories and pretence into the real world (Richert & Smith, 2011; Sutherland & Friedman, 2013), suggesting several possible ways in which the children in the current study viewed the omniscient informant.

One possibility is that the older children viewed the omniscient informant as special, but not that unusual in comparison with other agents with whom they have interacted.

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Indeed, it is quite normal in a child's day-to-day experience to be surrounded by adults who seem to 'just know' things that the child does not know. By the age of 4, over 50% of children understand people do not 'just know' what is in someone else's mind (Wellman, Cross, & Watson, 2001). In this study, even though the 5- to 6-year-olds accurately indicated how each informant came to have the relevant information, it is not clear children saw the ability to just know what someone else is thinking as extraordinary. Of the 21 older participants, only nine explicitly claimed the omniscient informant was using magic. In addition, the coding description that determined children's subgroup classification implies that an unspecified number of children indicated that both the omniscient and less knowledgeable informants had 'special' powers.

Consistent with the authors' hypothesis, the older children selected the omniscient informant significantly more often than chance, and the authors' claim that 'older children are more puzzled than younger children by the mind-reader's ability and invoke a magic power in the absence of any other plausible explanation' (p. 9) is consistent with prior research on children's belief in magic. Rosengren and Hickling (2000) indicated children's belief in magic peaks during the preschool years and then declines as children begin formal schooling. They suggested children's use of magic as a spontaneous causal explanation occurs when (1) children have heard adults use magic to explain strange events and (2) when children cannot think of another causal mechanism for an event. This characterization of children's use of magic suggests the children in the current study may have heard someone describe the fact that a person 'just knows' something as magical, supporting the authors' cultural transmission interpretation.

However, a close examination of the pattern of responses suggests the authors' claims regarding preference for this extraordinary ability may be over stated. Although the older children chose the omniscient informant significantly more often than chance, one should consider whether the mean response of 4.86 (out of 8) is demonstrating a clearly strong preference for the omniscient informant (Note: The effect sizes are not reported). The authors connect children's preference for learning from the omniscient informant in this context to cultural transmission of religious or supernatural beliefs and practices. This claim may have face validity, but raises a second possible way in which the children in the current study viewed the omniscient informant.

A second possibility is that children viewed the omniscient informants' expertise as relevant only within the context of the video presented. The fact that the older children chose the omniscient informant's claims regardless of domain raises questions about what children were evaluating about this informant. If the omniscient informant walked into the room, would a child expect the informant to know what the child had dreamed about the previous night? What the child had eaten for a snack before coming to the research lab? The name of the child's best friend? Whether the child really believed in Santa Claus?

As the authors note, the older children could be demonstrating some form of a halo effect, in which omniscience in one domain is indicative of an overall 'specialness' for knowledge in all domains. However, other findings suggest that children are selective about the extent to which they attribute special knowledge to experts (Lutz & Keil, 2002) and even to God (Lane, Wellman, & Evans, 2010). Thus, remaining questions exist about whether this specialness can be in any domain (e.g., extraordinary knowledge, magical abilities to transform the physical or biological world) and the extent to which children's views of an informant's 'specialness' is related to children's learning about the ordinary world in which children develop.

From a societal standpoint, this halo effect should be troubling. This halo effect could support gender or racial stereotyping of 'specialness', or in more extreme cases, could

justify the use of violence. On the morning of Saturday, 31 May 2014, two 12-year-old girls in Waukesha, WI, lured a friend to a park and stabbed her multiple times (Greene, 2014). They left her for dead in the hopes of impressing a fantastical being, Slender Man, who they believed was real. This perversion of the 'halo effect' should surely serve as warning in its application or over-application.

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