

Do preschoolers prefer high-status individuals?

(Abstract)

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Navigating the social world requires evaluating how others behave, communicate and feel. This enables estimating the costs and benefits of potential interactions with individuals in the environment, and helps identify those who could be more cooperative or those who enjoy more advantages. At early ages children show signs of social evaluations that rely on similarity, moral behaviour and even luck. For instance, preverbal infants like more puppets that prefer the same food or hold the same objects as themselves than puppets that do not (Mahajan & Wynn, 2012). Moreover, toddlers and infants prefer agents who engage in helping behavior and dislike those who act in an antisocial way (Hamlin & Wynn, 2011; Hamlin, Wynn, & Bloom, 2007; Hamlin et al., 2011). Finally, when presented with inequality based on luck (good vs. bad luck), 3- to 7-year-old children from different cultures found lucky individuals to be nicer and more likeable than unlucky individuals (Olson, et al., 2008).

In the current study we investigate whether another key dimension of the social environment – namely *hierarchy* – influences preschoolers' preferences. Hierarchy is a recurring feature that structures the social life of humans and other species. In

humans, social hierarchies are found even amongst the most egalitarian hunter-gatherer societies (Boehm, 1999), and social dominance structures spontaneously emerge in groups of preschoolers as young as two (Boyce, 2004). It has recently been found that preschoolers understand hierarchical relations between individuals on the basis of different asymmetrical cues and that they can make various social inferences from individuals' status (Charafeddine et al., 2015). Infant studies even showed that 15-year-old children were sensitive to hierarchy and expected dominance relationships to be stable across time (Mascaro & Csibra, 2012).

Less is however known about how preschoolers evaluate individuals embedded in a hierarchy. On the one hand, affiliating with and imitating high-status individuals can be a way to obtain the same advantages as those individuals and enhance one's own social rank. It also enables to avoid costly interpersonal conflicts with those individuals. It could therefore be expected that preschoolers would prefer a high-status agent over a low-status agent. On the other hand, a high-status individual might also be perceived as acting in a selfish and antisocial manner. For instance, in dominance relationships, the dominant imposes his will at the expense of the subordinate. Granted that preschoolers are sensitive to antisocial behavior, and show concern for victims they may prefer a subordinate over the dominant individual.

In the current study, two types of hierarchy were presented to 4- and 5-year-old children. The distinction between the high- and low-status individual was either based on wealth (one agent had more resource than another) or dominance (one agent imposes his will on another). While the results showed a preference for the richer agent, there was no preference for the dominant agent. Moreover, the preference for the richer agent was only observed in direct comparison situations; an agent who was previously richer than another (4 coins vs. 1 coin) was not preferred over an agent who was previously poorer than another (4 coins vs. 6 coins). The

results are discussed in terms of positive and negative evaluations of hierarchical features.

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