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Children's reputation management: Learning to identify what is socially valued and acting upon it

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Abstract

Much of what people do is motivated by a concern with social evaluation. We argue that the process of figuring out what others value and making effective use of this information presents significant cognitive challenges. These challenges include reasoning about the relevance of different forms of information and making inferences about the mental lives of others. They also include modifying one's behavior in light of whatever personal qualities appear to be valued in an effort to appeal to different audiences. We argue that the foundations of many of the important skills needed to meet these challenges are already in place early during childhood, but that the challenges themselves persist well into adulthood.

People sometimes wear uncomfortable clothes, buy cars they cannot afford, and subject themselves to surgical procedures to influence how they are perceived by others. By their second birthday, children's behavior is already sensitive to cues relating to social evaluation (Botto & Rochat, 2019), and over the next few years they strategically act to enhance their reputation (Silver & Shaw, 2018). Here we examine a set of important but frequently overlooked challenges that children face as they navigate this process: determining which behaviors and qualities are socially valued by other people, and learning to apply this understanding to guide their own behavior.

It is Not Obvious How to Achieve a Good Reputation

Any student who has taken a psychology class that covers research methods has been warned that the validity of a study can be undermined if participants are motivated to respond in ways that they think will encourage others to view them favorably. While such a warning is appropriate, it also reveals a deeper insight into human psychology: people often think about what others value, and these considerations can drive behavior.

Recently, researchers have begun to ask fundamental questions about how children adjust their behavior to obtain more favorable social evaluations (Engelmann & Rapp, 2018; Shaw et al., 2014). Much of this research has focused on behaviors such as stealing or sharing that have strong valence-based associations. This research shows that by age 5, children steal less and share more when they are being observed by peers than when they are alone (Engelmann, Herrmann, & Tomasello, 2012). In cases such as this, determining how to gain

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more favorable social evaluations may be relatively easy, given that the relevant prescriptive norms and behavioral options are likely to be clear and straightforward. However, in many other contexts, such decisions pose difficult cognitive challenges, such as recognizing the relevant information, using this information to make mental state inferences, and figuring out how and when to act on these inferences. Figure 1 presents a simple model of some of the central challenges.

The Challenge of Inferring Which Qualities are Socially Valued

The observable evidence about what people appear to value does not always match what they actually value. For example, a teacher who praises a poorly-performing student for trying hard may seem to be expressing a belief in the value of effort, but in reality she may be simply trying to boost the student's self-esteem (Amemiya & Wang, 2018). This means that the relevant information about what people value can be difficult to recognize or interpret, and that doing so requires a sophisticated ability to reason about other people's goals and behaviors in the context of prevailing cultural norms (Asaba & Gweon, 2020). For example, in order to effectively make use of such nonobvious cues, children need to understand that the goal of communication is not always to convey the most accurate information, and to recognize which goals are most plausible in a given context (Yoon et al., 2020). Some of these goals have to do with promoting social relationships, which might motivate someone to claim to be impressed by his friend's high score at a video game even though he does not think anyone should waste time playing. Other goals can relate to self-promotion, which might motivate someone to feign outrage in response to wrongdoing in order to appear morally virtuous. Although the basic capacity to make inferences about others' goals is in place in infancy (Baillargeon, Scott, & Bian, 2016), even older children often have difficulty determining people's goals and their implications. For example, when evaluating people who engage in generous acts, 6- to 7-year-olds may fail to consider ulterior motives, such as those relating to their reputation (Heyman et al., 2014). This suggests that reasoning about other people's goals presents difficulties for young children that can interfere with their ability to assess what those people value.

In the example above involving a praise of a student for trying hard, the information about what the teacher values is directed at the child who is making the inferences, and it is specifically about the child. However, information can also be about other people, and directed toward other audiences. Young children can learn in these contexts as well, such as when they learn by observing the consequences of others' behavior (Engarhos et al., 2020). For example, Ma et al. (2018) found that 5-year-olds who cheated at a game were more likely to confess to it if they had just observed a peer being praised for confessing to cheating. This kind of learning is likely to take place in other contexts as well, such as when a child makes a mental note to avoid expressing sadness around her peers after she observes her classmate being called a crybaby (Banerjee & Yuill, 1999). By making use of such observations, children may be able to learn some important life lessons without the high costs of mistakes that can be associated with learning through firsthand experience.

Children can take advantage of additional low-cost opportunities to learn about what people value by listening to evaluative comments in the form of gossip about others (Baumeister,

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Zhang, & Vohs, 2004). Recent research suggests that children as young as age 5 already have some capacity to recognize the relevance of these kinds of comments (Qin et al., 2020). Zhao et al. (2020) found that children cheated more after overhearing an experimenter praise a classmate for being smart, which can be interpreted as a cue that the experimenter values displays of intelligence (see Good & Shaw, 2021). In such contexts, children may view cheating as a means to achieve better performance and more favorable ability evaluations.

Children also face the challenge of interpreting conflicting evidence, as when someone communicates contradictory messages to different people. This point is illustrated by an episode that began when the first author's then 9-year-old brother altered some electrical wiring in a neighbor's basement because, he explained, he was "bored". The first author overheard her mother respond to this episode in conflicting ways: when speaking to her son the amateur electrician she expressed sharp disapproval, but later when talking to a friend she marveled at his cleverness. There may also be conflicts between people's stated beliefs and the way they act upon them. In a survey of parents, Heyman, Luu, and Lee (2009) found that about three-fourths of parents reported teaching their children that lying is never acceptable (e.g., "we do not lie in this family—it is a sin; the truth is always told"). However, most of these parents admitted to lying to their children to achieve instrumental goals, such as getting them to stop misbehaving. When children eventually discover that their parents have been lying to them they may feel the need to resolve this apparent discrepancy. This can be done by privileging one form of evidence over another, or by trying to reconcile inconsistencies, such as by concluding that the rules about lying are different for children versus adults.

Once children determine what is socially valued, they face the challenge of determining whether generalizations across people are warranted. For example, a child who concludes that her friend values her dark humor may be unsure whether other people in her life feel the same way. Similarly, a child who learns that a specific evaluator cares more about performance outcomes than effort or learning may wonder whether this attitude will be shared among teachers in general, adults in general, or all people (Good & Shaw, 2021). These questions can be applied to any context in which children try to predict whether inferences they have made about what some people value will also apply to others, and can extend to questions of generalization across communities. For example, a child may learn that respect for the wisdom of elders is a widely-held value within her own community and wonder whether this value is also held within the communities of some of her classmates.

The Challenge of Acting Upon what is Seen as Socially Valued

After children make inferences about what particular individuals value, they must decide how to use this information to inform their actions. One challenge involves anticipating the reputational consequences of specific behaviors. Sometimes the same action can have either positive or negative implications. For example, when people make positive claims about themselves, the reputational benefits they are seeking can be negated if they are seen as engaging in self-promotion, which is a risk that children younger than about 8 years of age often have trouble recognizing (Amemiya et al., in press; Lockhart, Goddu, & Keil, 2018; Watling & Banerjee, 2007). The same behaviors can have different implications based on

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their frequency or intensity. For example, even though people generally value moral virtue, both children and adults sometimes make negative judgments of individuals who act in highly virtuous ways, perhaps because it can make them look bad by comparison (Minson & Monin, 2012; Tasimi, Dominguez, & Wynn, 2015).

Adjusting one's behavior to one's audience presents further challenges, and there is evidence that children begin to make such adjustments early in life.Ma et al. (2020) found that 3-and 4-year-olds waited substantially longer on a delay of gratification task when they were told that their teacher would find out how long they waited, as compared to being told that a peer would find out how long they waited. In addition, Engelmann et al. (2013) found that 5-year-olds shared more when they were being observed by an ingroup member as compared to an outgroup member. These kinds of behavioral decisions may vary based on children's motivations to please different audiences, as well as their recognition of the ways in which people differ in what they value.

As Sperber and Baumard (2012) noted, "Behaving only in ways that would secure other people's approval cannot be a systematic policy, since having a good reputation, however important, is far from being our sole objective" (p. 28). People may hold goals that have little if anything to do with how they are perceived by others, such as those that relate to learning new things, or genuine concern for the welfare of others. There can also be reputational goals other than promoting favorable judgements of oneself, such as when someone tries to present herself as the type of person who never backs down, even though she realizes acting this way is likely to harm her reputation more generally. In other cases, people try to influence the way they are perceived as a means to accomplish other goals. For example, the first author knew an elementary school student who admitted she tried to appear unintelligent to reduce burdensome academic expectations that she felt were being placed on her. This is similar to the phenomena of self-handicapping, in which people downplay their effort so that any failures can be attributed to lack of effort and they can maintain positive impressions of their competence (see Good & Shaw, 2021).

Future Considerations

We have focused on young children's inferential capacities as they reason about and act upon qualities that are socially valued. However, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that older children and adults continue to grapple with these issues as well, especially in new social environments (Peysakhovich & Rand, 2016). Determining what is valued can be challenging even in familiar social environments, given that nearly any skill or personal quality might fill some people with admiration while leaving others unimpressed.

In our analysis, we have focused on cues in the form of communication that is targeted to specific individuals, but there are other kinds of cues that are important to recognize, interpret, and act upon. These include observations of how people spend their free time, symbolic artifacts such as statues or medals, and a culture's well-known proverbs, such as "no pain, no gain" or "cleanliness is next to Godliness."

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Our model will need to be further developed to examine strategies that people use to actively seek out evidence, such as engaging in dialogue with others (Harris et al, 2018). For example, people may attempt strategies that resemble the "trial balloons" politicians often float to assess the prospects for a controversial proposal without formally introducing it. A child could take this approach by suggesting that he might break a class rule as a way to assess how his friends would be likely to respond if he actually did it. Sharing gossip can be another low-cost strategy for learning about what other people value. For example, a child could disapprovingly tell his friends about an incident of tattling, and then observe their reactions to gauge the extent to which they value loyalty to the peer group.

There are unanswered questions about the mechanisms involved in meeting the cognitive challenges that are discussed here. One possibility is that prior schemas or associations can be used to scaffold new inferences. For example, a child might notice that people often compete for things that are socially valued, and then use this knowledge to make the reverse inference that if people are competing over something, it must have some social value.

Further work will be needed to determine the extent to which the types of challenges that are discussed here differ from other cognitive and social-cognitive challenges. One area of overlap in need of future analysis involves making sense of testimony about social factors such as whether an individual is trustworthy, or nonsocial factors, such as which animals are dangerous (Boseovski & Thurman, 2014; Harris et al., 2018). Like testimony about what is socially valued, these forms of testimony are often valenced, and they can appear to be in conflict with other evidence. However, there are important differences. For example, questions about how to make generalizations across people are especially important when considering what is socially valued, and different forms of prior knowledge are likely to be applied when interpreting evidence across these types of contexts (see Harris et al., 2018 and Marble & Boseovski, 2020).

In sum, the tendency of people to care about what others think of them begins early in life, and it motivates a wide range of behavior. We argue that determining which qualities are socially valued and applying this knowledge present a diverse set of nonobvious cognitive challenges. Although children begin to develop many of the necessary cognitive skills early in development, navigating these challenges remains an important part of social cognition throughout life.

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Making Inferences about What is Socially Valued

recognizing & interpreting evidence
My teacher says there are no stupid questions. I think this means he isn't judging the ability of his students.

weighing & integrating evidence
My teacher made fun of a student's question even though he says there are no stupid questions. I think he cares about looking smart.

generalizing across people
I wonder whether all teachers care about looking smart as much as my teacher does.

Acting Based on What is Socially Valued

anticipating consequences
If I tell my teacher I didn't have time to study for the test I just took, it might make him think I'm smart.

adjusting to different audiences
Two teachers I know don't agree about whether questioning the rules makes people look smart, and I keep this in mind when I talk to each of them.

coordinating goals
I have a question that I want to know the answer to, but I'm worried that asking it during class will make me look stupid.

Figure 1.
Some of the challenges involved in reasoning about and acting upon what is socially valued, illustrated with hypothetical quotations from the domain of achievement motivation (see Good & Shaw, 2021).