The Linguistic Transmission of Maladaptive Beliefs About Science

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Introduction

- Generic language can transmit essentialist beliefs about scientists by suggesting that scientists are a distinct kind of person with innate talent.¹
- Girls who believe success requires innate talent are less likely to persist after a setback than those who view success as determined by effort.²,³
- Girls who hear generic language about “scientists” persist less than boys on a science task. Girls and boys who hear non-generic language about “doing science” persist equally. This interactive effect increases in children older than 5-years-old.⁴

Do younger children, who are still developing beliefs about the social world and perhaps are not yet aware of gender stereotypes, show the same interactive effect of language and gender that we see in older children?

Methods

N = 167 (male n = 82; female n = 85) 4- and 5-year-old children hear one of two introductions to a science game using generic or non-generic language.

- **Condition Training**
  - **Generic** Scientists explore the world and discover new things.
  - **Non-generic** When people do science, they explore the world and discover new things.

Persistence Measure

- Task was a science game where children guessed what kind of food different animals eat.
- The first two trials elicited one correct and one incorrect response and experimenter provided feedback.
- After each critical trial (up to 10 total), children were asked if they wanted to keep playing or do something else.
- Persistence was measured by number of trials completed.

N = 98 (male n = 44; female n = 44) Implicit Stereotype Measure

An Implicit Association Task⁵ was used to assess how much children associate girls and boys with gender-stereotypical toys.

D score = reaction time for girl/pink – reaction time for boy/pink standard deviation

Results

Younger children: All benefit from non-generic language.

Older children: Girls benefit most from non-generic language

Conclusions

- Younger boys and older girls benefit most from non-generic language.
- Gender stereotypes have opposite effects for boys and girls, suggesting that stereotypes contribute to children’s behavior.

Future Directions

- Can age-related changes be explained by increased stereotype endorsement?
- What kinds of stereotypes affect children’s persistence?

References & Acknowledgments


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