

The Role of Authority's Testimony in Preschoolers' Ownership Judgment: A Study with Conflicting Cues Method

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Abstract : Authorities often intervene in children's property conflicts, which may affect young children's ownership understanding. First possession is a typical rule of ownership judgment. We recruited Chinese preschoolers as subjects and investigated their ownership reasoning regarding first possession, by setting three conditions via a conflicting cues method, in which a third party (mother or peer friend)'s testimony was always opposite to the cue of first possession (authority/non-authority testimony condition), or only the cue of first possession was present (no testimony condition). In Study A, we examined forty-two 3- and 5-year olds' attribution and justification of ownership. The results showed while 5-year olds gave more support for the first possessor as the owner across three conditions, 3-year olds' choice for the first possessor had no difference from the non-first possessor in the authority testimony condition. Moreover, 3-year olds tended to justify by reference to what mother said in the authority testimony condition, 5-year olds consistently referred to the first possession in three conditions. In Study B, we added two ownership questions to quantify children's ability of ownership reasoning with four age groups (n = 32 for the 3-year-olds, n = 33 for the 4-year-olds, n = 27 for the 5-year olds and n = 30 for the adults) to explore the developmental trajectory further. It revealed that while 5-year olds' performances were similar to the adults' and always judged the first possessor as owner in three conditions, 3- and 4-year olds' performed at chance level in the authority testimony condition. The results imply that Chinese young preschooler's ownership reasoning was susceptible to authority's testimony. Family authority may play an important role in diluting children's adherence to ownership principles, which will be helpful for children to learn to share with others.

Keywords : authority, ownership judgment, preschoolers, testimony

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