“I DON’T KNOW BUT I KNOW WHO TO ASK”: 12-MONTH-OLDS ACTIVELY SEEK INFORMATION FROM KNOWLEDGEABLE ADULTS

Bazhydai M., Westermann G., Parise E.

Lancaster University, Lancaster, UK

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Infants’ active social communication, especially pointing, has been proposed to serve information-seeking function (Southgate, Van Maanen, & Csibra, 2007). Recent experimental work showed that infants are sensitive to the distribution of knowledge among social partners (Poulin-Dubois & Brosseau-Liard, 2016) and expect to learn from previously reliable social partners (Begus & Southgate, 2012; Goupil, Romand-Monnier, & Kouider, 2016; Tummeltshammer, Wu, Sobel, & Kirkham, 2014). When preverbal and pre-pointing infants are motivated to obtain information they cannot discover independently, how do they pose epistemic requests to their social partners?

The present study investigated whether 12-months-olds reliably identify and selectively seek information from more knowledgeable adults when in need of relevant information. We measured social referencing as a behavioural correlate of epistemic, information-seeking process. In a live, head-mounted eye-tracking laboratory experiment, infants were introduced to two unfamiliar adults, an Informant (reliably labeling novel toys) and a Non-Informant (providing an equal amount of social engagement, but ignorant about object labels). At test, the caregiver placed two novel objects out of infants’ reach and asked to locate a novel referent among them – that is, to make an essentially impossible choice. Infants were significantly more likely to turn to the Informant than the Non-Informant. In addition, infants looked equally more often at either the Informant or the Caregiver than at the Non-Informant, and following the initial look, increased looking at the Informant while reduced looking at the Caregiver. These results suggest that preverbal infants actively and selectively seek information from social partners using social referencing prior to the emergence of pointing as part of the communicative toolkit.