



Prestige Bias or Expertise Effects?

Jennifer Vonk, Zachary Willockx, & Brock Brothers
Oakland University

Introduction

Individuals sometimes fall prey to biases when processing information without conscious awareness of these biases (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). Humans learn socially and may exhibit adaptive biases during the social transmission of information.

For instance, prestige may be an important source of bias in culturally transmitted information (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001). Individuals can be biased to attend more to speakers who are higher in prestige, and to endorse their statements as factual, even when they are false.

Children learned more and preferentially attended more to models that had previously been attended to (i.e. higher in prestige), but these effects also seemed context specific, indicating that relevant expertise was also important (Chudek, Heller, Birch & Henrich, 2012).

Prestige is often confounded with other variables, such as power (Reyes-Garcia et al., 2008), and expertise, in that individuals higher in prestige may also have more expertise on the topic at hand, making the decision to endorse such speakers logical rather than biased.

Prestige may be used equally often as information about prior success, even though information about success may be more useful (Atkisson, O'Brien & Mesoudi, 2012).

The aim of the current study was to disentangle the contribution of prestige and expertise to participants' agreement with several true and false scientific statements. As individuals vary in susceptibility to the prestige bias (Schmidt, Schmerl, & Steffens, 1971), we examined religious beliefs as a possible moderator of the effects of prestige.

Method

304 participants (253 women; 238 religious) participated in the study online via surveymonkey.com. Participants indicated their age, sex, race, religious and political affiliations. Participants rated their level of agreement with 16 scientific claims on a 5-point scale. Following at least two weeks, participants responded to the same 16 claims again, but this time the claims were attributed to speakers who varied in expertise regarding the relevant topic, and prestige in general.

8 lists were created such that each item was presented once in each of the following conditions:

- High Expertise High Prestige True
- High Expertise Low Prestige True
- Low Expertise High Prestige True
- Low Expertise Low Prestige True
- High Expertise High Prestige False
- High Expertise Low Prestige False
- Low Expertise High Prestige False
- Low Expertise Low Prestige False

Each list contained two items from each of the above eight conditions. Participants' responses to the items were compared before and after the speaker had been assigned to measure effects of truth, prestige, expertise, and religious orientation (religious or non-religious).

Discussion

Agreement with the statements tended to increase when they were attributed to speakers high in prestige and expertise, and decrease when they were attributed to speakers low in prestige and expertise, although only the effects of expertise were significant in the post-test. These findings were obtained regardless of whether the statement was true or false. Religious individuals were more likely to believe false statements, regardless of the speaker, compared to non-religious individuals.

Although prestige undoubtedly has an impact on people's endorsement of statements, here we showed that expertise had a more powerful effect, suggesting that participants may be evaluating statements logically rather than falling prey to the prestige bias.

Religious individuals appear to be more likely to endorse statements that are incorrect compared to non-religious individuals, suggesting a higher level of trust or gullibility that was not moderated by prestige of the speaker.

Contact: vonk@oakland.edu

Results

