Children's understanding of modesty in front of peer and adult audiences

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Abstract

Previous research has suggested that the understanding of modesty—downplaying one's

achievements to evoke a positive social evaluation—develops in the primary school years.

However, very little is known about how children's understanding of modesty is associated

with social contextual factors, such as audience type. A sample of 92 children aged 8-11

years responded to hypothetical vignettes where the protagonist responded either modestly or

immodestly to praise. The findings supported earlier indications of an increase with age in

the understanding of modesty, and further found that modesty was judged as more

appropriate for peer audiences than for adult audiences. No interactions between age group

and audience type were observed. Children's increasing approval of modesty was associated

with a tendency to justify their judgements by referring to concerns about social evaluation.

Children's understanding of modesty in front of peer and adult audiences

Self-presentational behaviours—behaviours that are exhibited to control the impressions that an audience will form of the actor (Goffman, 1959)—have occupied the thoughts of social psychologists for several decades, but it is only recently that we have begun to examine their development in childhood. This study explored children's understanding of modesty—the downplaying of one's achievements to evoke a positive social evaluation (Leary, 1996). Modesty is an important social skill for children to acquire. Indeed, Leary (1996) has argued that there is a social norm of modesty, whereby individuals are required not to be too self-promoting yet are expected to present themselves as positively as possible. If this norm is violated individuals will often be viewed as boastful and untruthful, or as having an ulterior motive (Robinson, Johnson, & Shields, 1995). Furthermore, those who violate this modesty norm risk being rejected by their peers (Leary, 1996). The present study aims to address when and in what context children come to understand the social value of a modest self-presentation; in particular, we addressed children's judgements and reasoning about modest and immodest responses in the contexts of peer and adult audiences.

To show an understanding of modesty a child must first endorse the social norm that a modest response is more appropriate than an immodest response, and they must show an appreciation of the social evaluative purpose of modesty (i.e., the child must understand that modesty is used to manipulate the audience's opinions or beliefs about the self; e.g., "he wants them to think he's nice"). Critically, although modesty is a social norm that can be used to ensure that the audience does not feel inferior to the actor (Gibbins & Walker, 1996), modesty is also a self-presentational behaviour that is utilised to enhance the likeability of an individual by a particular audience (Jones & Pittman, 1982).

Existing research has provided important insights into children's understanding of modesty. First, there are some preliminary indications that children recognize the positive value of modesty and that this awareness emerges at around 8 years of age. Bennett and Yeeles (1990a) found that 8-year-olds place negative connotations on children who 'show off' (are immodest; e.g., they are seen as 'naughty' or as if they 'think they're the best'; p. 593), thus indicating that at 8 years of age children do recognise the social norm of modesty. More recently, Lee, Xu, Fu, Cameron, and Chen (2001) have observed that telling the truth about positive deeds is rated less favourably, and lying about positive deeds more favourably, with increasing age. However, this was true among Taiwan and Mainland Chinese children, but not among Canadian children.

Second, other research has sought to identify more precisely when children acknowledge that modesty has a positive effect on how an audience would evaluate the self, and when they begin using modesty as a self-presentational tactic. Yoshida, Kojo, & Kaku (1982) found that 8-year-old children recognized the positive effect of modesty on peer evaluations of the self and the negative effect of immodesty on peer evaluations of the self, and, therefore, themselves tended to be more modest when they had an audience than when there was no audience present. Similarly, in an experiment with 6- to 10-year-olds, Banerjee (2000) had children listen to four stories, where the protagonist responded modestly or immodestly to praise that was given to him or her in front of peers. Following each story children were asked to judge the audience's beliefs about the protagonist, as well as whether the modest or immodest response was appropriate and why. Banerjee found that as children increased in age they increasingly believed that modest responses were more appropriate than immodest responses, and were increasingly able to recognize the positive impact of a modest presentation on the audience's evaluation of the protagonist.

Notwithstanding these studies, little is known about the contexts in which the understanding of modesty develops. The present study was designed to explore further the context within which children may come to understand modesty as a self-presentational tactic. Lee et al.'s (2001) research suggests that cultural norms regarding self-effacement are important, and it seems likely that different social contexts within a culture may also elicit different self-presentational tactics. In the present research, we directly address children's judgements about modesty in different audience contexts.   Some existing research suggests that children do consider audience information when determining how they should self-present during an interaction. In particular, children are able to change their self-presentational tactics depending on knowledge of the audience's motivation (Aloise-Young, 1993), and children are able to change their self-presentational behaviour depending on knowledge of the audience's likes and dislikes (Banerjee, 2002). Importantly, research has also shown that children believe that different presentations of reasons for academic success and failure are appropriate for peer and adult audiences (Juvonen & Murdock, 1993, 1995). These findings are likely to stem from differing motivations for the interactions; for instance, children may offer more 'effort' explanations, which relate to controllable and internal causes (e.g., "I did well on my coursework because I studied really hard"), for success with adults as they are able to administer many rewards or punishments. In contrast, Juvonen and Murdock (1995) found that 6th and 8th graders believed that the less effort a successful individual put into their work, the more popular they would be with their peers. Thus, more modest responses to praise, typically attributing success to external causes, may be seen by children as more advisable for peer audiences than for adult audiences. It is therefore expected that children may be particularly motivated to use modest self-presentations with their peers to enhance the likelihood of being perceived as likeable.

More generally, developmental research gives us good reason to suppose that children would indeed come to understand the value of modest self-presentation first in the context of peer interactions. As many researchers have argued already, children's concerns about peer group acceptance grow during the primary school years (e.g., see Parker & Gottman, 1989), and making appropriate self-presentations is likely to be a critical determinant of such acceptance. Given the preliminary suggestions from studies that children at age 8 already seem to view showing off in a negative way (Banerjee, 2000; Bennett & Yeeles, 1990a; Yoshida et al., 1982), primary school children are likely to first endorse the social norm of modesty in the context of peer rather than adult audiences. Since previous research indicates that children begin to understand modesty as a self-presentational tactic from around age 8, we investigated this issue in a sample of 8-9- and 10-11-year-old children.

In line with previous research (e.g., see Banerjee, 2000), we expect that the older children would be more likely than the younger children to approve of modest and disapprove of immodest responses to praise. In addition, they should offer more social evaluative justifications for why they approve or disapprove of the modest and the immodest responses. Moreover, use of these justifications should be related to children's approval of modest rather than immodest self-presentational statements. Finally, we hypothesise that modest self-presentations will be seen as more appropriate for peer audiences than for adult audiences.

<div align="center">Method</div>

Participants

92 predominantly white British children in two age groups were recruited from two urban primary schools in primarily working-class neighbourhoods. The younger group included forty-seven 8- to 9-year-olds (mean age 9.23 years old, range 8.58 – 9.83 years, 26 females), while the older group included forty-five 10- to 11-year-olds (mean age 11.22 years old, range 10.73 – 11.69 years, 25 females).

Materials

The modesty task, described below, was presented to the children in the form of a multimedia presentation using Microsoft PowerPoint on an Apple Macintosh laptop computer (including recordings of the stories, text of the stories, and cartoon-style drawings of the interactions in the stories).[1]

Design and Procedure

A female experimenter saw each child individually in a quiet room. The child was seated in front of the laptop computer. Following a similar format to Banerjee (2000) children heard eight stories on the computer (see example in Appendix 1), accompanied by cartoon-style drawings of the interactions, which involved a protagonist responding either modestly or immodestly to praise that was offered to him or her by a second character (either a peer or an adult). After each story, the children were reminded of how the protagonist had responded and were asked whether or not this was a good thing to say (*modesty approval judgement;* e.g., Now remember, *X* said, "...". Was that a good thing for him/her to say?) and also why it was or was not a good thing to say (*justification*, e.g., Why was it a good [not a good] thing to say?). If the child had difficulty with the justification (e.g., was silent, stated that they didn't know why) the justification question was repeated. Further probes were offered if a child referred to a social outcome justification (e.g., 'why would they let him play on their team?'; 'how will that get *Y* to let *X* on the team?'), to determine whether or not children were in fact articulating a concern about social evaluation.

There were eight versions of the powerpoint presentation to allow for randomization of the four possible story types (peer audience, modest response; peer audience, immodest response; adult audience, modest response; adult audience, immodest response). Each version consisted of four peer audience stories and four adult audience stories, with the

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[1] Children also completed a pilot version of a new questionnaire assessing children's social self-awareness and perceived popularity.

protagonist responding modestly in half of each and immodestly in the remainder. Additionally, the order of story presentation was randomised for each participant.

Scoring

In judging the appropriateness of the protagonist's response, children received a 1 when they said that a modest response was good or an immodest response was bad and a 0 if they stated that a modest response was bad or an immodest response was good. Therefore, children had a 'modesty approval' score of 0 to 8 across the eight stories. The scores were also summed separately for the peer and adult audience stories, for a range of 0 to 4. High scores indicated that the child believed a modest response was the better response.

Children's justifications for why the character's statement was or was not a good thing to say were categorised using the coding scheme developed by Banerjee (2000, pp. 503-504), whereby each justification was coded into one of five categories:

> *Social evaluation*: Reference to others' evaluations, or reference to showing-off or boasting (e. g. "Because then they'll think he's really good").
>
> *Social outcomes*: Reference to overt social consequences (e. g. "Then they'll let him play in their team"). For justifications placed in this category, further probes (e. g. "Why?" "How?") did not elicit references to social evaluation.
>
> *Others' feelings*: Reference to others' feelings (e. g. "So that they won't feel bad that they're not as good").
>
> *Truth*: Reference to the "true" state of affairs (e. g. "Because he is really good at it").
>
> *Residual*: Any other response, including "Don't know", nonsense justifications and, very occasionally, sensible justifications that did not fall into the above categories (e.g., "Then they won't cheat and copy his maths work").

An independent rater, blind to the age of the participants, coded one-third of the justifications from each age group, and inter-rater agreement was 93% (κ = .90). The number of

justifications offered for each category was counted for the peer stories and for the adult

stories (possible range of 0 to 8 across the whole set of stories).

<div align="center">Results</div>

Modesty Approval Scores

Table 1 shows the mean modesty approval scores on the peer and adult stories for the

older and younger children. A mixed design analysis of variance was conducted, with age

group and gender as the between subjects variables and audience type (peer vs. adult) as the

within subjects variable. First, there was a main effect of age group (F (1, 88) = 7.68, p =

.01, partial η^2 = .08), whereby the older children were significantly more likely to approve of

modesty and disapprove of immodesty than the younger children (*M (SDs)* = 2.80 (0.94) and

2.26 (0.94), respectively). Second, in line with our prediction, there was a significant main

effect of audience type (F (1, 88) = 6.30, p = .01, partial η^2 = .07). Children judged modest

responses as appropriate and immodest responses as inappropriate significantly more often

for the peer audiences than for the adult audiences (*M (SDs)* = 2.67 (1.06) and 2.37 (1.18),

respectively). The interaction between age group and audience type was not significant, $F <$

1, and no gender effects were apparent, Fs < 2.72, ps > .10.

<div align="center">[Insert Table 1 here]</div>

One-sample t-tests were used to determine whether or not the modesty approval

scores were significantly different from chance for each age group. Scores across all eight

stories were not significantly different from chance (where the chance value was 4) for the

younger children (*M* = 4.51, SD = 1.89; t (46) = 1.86, p > .05), but were significantly greater

than chance for the older children (*M* = 5.60, SD = 1.88, t (44) = 5.72, p < .01). Upon closer

examination, however, it was found that the younger age group did have a greater than

chance approval score when the audience was a peer (where the chance value was 2), t (46) =

2.79, $p < .01$, yet was not significantly different from chance when the audience was an adult,

t (46) = .40, $p > .50$. In contrast, for both the peer and adult audience stories the older

children scored higher than chance (t (44) = 6.28, $p < .01$, and t (44) = 3.84, $p < .01$,

respectively).

Justifications for Approval Judgements

Table 2 shows the mean number of each type of justification offered by the older and

the younger children for the eight scenarios. Our particular interest was in the social

evaluation justifications. An analysis of variance on the number of these justifications

showed no main or interaction effects of gender or audience type, all Fs < 1.4, ps > .23, but

confirmed that there was a main effect of age (F (1, 88) = 6.98, $p = .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .07$),

where the younger children offered fewer social evaluation justifications than the older

children. Similar analyses on the other justification types revealed that the older children

offered more social outcome justifications than the younger children (F (1, 88) = 6.14, $p =

.02$, partial $\eta^2 = .07$), while they offered fewer truth justifications (F (1, 88) = 12.04, $p = .001$,

partial $\eta^2 = .12$). Additionally, children offered more truth justifications when the audience

was an adult than when the audience was a peer (means *(SDs)* = 2.45 (1.39) and 2.21 (1.39),

respectively; F (1, 88) = 4.61, $p = .04$, partial $\eta^2 = .05$). There were no significant effects in

the analyses on the justifications referring to others' feelings or on the residual justifications.

In confirmation of this pattern, correlational analysis showed that as children increased in age

they offered more social evaluation justifications (r (90) = .32, $p = .001$), more social

outcome justifications (r (90) = .25, $p < .01$), and fewer truth justifications (r (90) = -.36, $p <

.001$). There were no significant relationships between age and the number of others'

feelings justifications or residual justifications.

[Insert Table 2 here]

Relationships between justifications offered and children's approval judgments

In addition to independent analyses of children's approval of modest and immodest statements, and the subsequent justifications for their judgements, it was expected that there would be a relationship between the use of social evaluation justifications and children's modesty approval scores. Correlational analyses, with age partialled out, revealed that children who offered more social evaluation justifications, and those who offered more others' feelings justifications, generally had higher modesty approval scores (r (89) = .41, $p <$ .001, r (89) = .21, p = .05, respectively). In contrast, those who had lower modesty approval scores generally offered more truth justifications (r (89) = -.36, $p <$ .001). There was no significant relationship between modesty approval scores and the use of social outcome justifications ($r <$ .10).

In addition to the above findings, there was a significant negative relationship between the number of social evaluations justifications offered and the number of truth justifications offered (r (89) = -.71, $p <$ .001). This strong correlation led us to conduct additional correlational analyses examining the relationship between the modesty approval scores and number of social evaluative justifications, with both age and number of truth justifications partialled out. There remained a significant relationship between the two, r (88) = .24, p = .02. In contrast, the correlation between the modesty approval scores and the number of truth justifications was no longer significant after partialling out age and the number of social evaluative justifications, r (88) = -.11, *ns*. This provides further support for our argument that children's judgment that modesty is a better response to praise than immodesty is related to their understanding of the social evaluative purpose of modesty.

Discussion

The present study provides an important replication of previous findings that the

understanding of modesty increases with age. Older children judged modest responses as appropriate and immodest responses as inappropriate more often than the younger children, and offered more social evaluative justifications than the younger children. Moreover, the present study provides new evidence that the modesty norm (children's belief that a modest response is more appropriate than an immodest response) first appears in the context of peer audiences: children in general judged modest responses as more appropriate for peer audiences than for adult audiences, and the younger children scored above chance on their modest approval judgements only on the peer stories.

These results replicate Banerjee's (2000) demonstration that children in this age range are able to understand modesty as a self-presentational tactic, and that this understanding of modesty increases with age. This is consistent with growing literature showing that children's appreciation of self-presentational processes undergoes significant development during primary school (Aloise-Young, 1993; Banerjee, 2002; Banerjee & Yuill, 1999; Bennett & Yeeles, 1990b). Furthermore, the present results further detail the developmental changes that children go through between 8 and 10 years of age in their thinking about modest self-presentations. For instance, in addition to the growing use of social evaluation justifications, older children offered more social outcome justifications and fewer truth justifications. However these types of justification were not significantly associated with the approval of modesty after partialling out age and the use of social evaluative justifications. Thus, although children are increasingly focusing on the social consequences of the protagonist's response, attention to social evaluation processes in particular was uniquely related to the approval of modesty.

At the same time, it should be noted that although there was no difference between the age groups in the use of justifications referring to others' feelings, such justifications were positively associated with the approval of modesty. This finding provides support for the

notion, discussed earlier, that modesty may be understood as a desirable social behaviour for prosocial as well as for self-presentational reasons.

Turning to our main hypothesis, children did indeed differentiate their judgements about modest and immodest behaviour in response to a basic social contextual cue – whether the audience was a peer or an adult. Consistent with existing suggestions that children themselves view immodesty negatively (e.g., Bennett & Yeeles, 1990a; Yoshida et al., 1982) and that they view attributions of success to personal efforts as likely to decrease popularity (Juvonen & Murdock, 1995), the children in our investigation were more likely to endorse modest responses with a peer audience than with an adult audience. Interestingly, there was no such audience distinction in the number of social evaluation justifications offered by the children, suggesting that the full appreciation of the self-presentational motive, once acquired, may be demonstrated regardless of audience type. This lack of audience differentiation with the social evaluation justifications contrasts with the finding that children offered more truth justifications when the audience was an adult than when the audience was a peer. Therefore, children judge that individuals' responses to praise from an adult, rather than from a peer, are more likely to reflect the truth. In contrast, once self-presentational motives are understood, they may be used to make sense of modest responses to praise from both adults and peers.

This research demonstrates that the basic judgement of modest behaviour as good and immodest behaviour as bad may be learned as a simple rule on the basis of contingent positive and negative responses from peers. Work on situated learning suggests that in many domains, "the physical and social contexts within which learning takes place remain an integral part of that which is learned" (Wood, 1998, p. 42). It seems possible that when the modesty norm is first learned, children will tend to apply that knowledge in the environment or situations where it was acquired (i.e., with their peers). When the underlying motivation

for modest self-presentation is appreciated, typically in the later primary school years, this understanding may then be applied to interactions with both adults and peers.

The observed results are thus consistent with the suggestion that children first learn the social value of modesty in the context of making and keeping friends and gaining peer group acceptance. Interestingly, it appears that the emergence of modesty understanding coincides with the transition from early childhood to middle childhood, involving changes in many areas of children's social relationships—children in middle childhood tend to interact in triads or larger groups rather than in the dyadic groups of early childhood, and the peer groups become stratified into popularity and status hierarchies (see Erwin, 1993; Parker and Gottman, 1989). As a consequence of these group processes, children are likely to become more explicitly aware of the self-presentational advantages and disadvantages of particular social behaviours (see Banerjee and Yuill, 1999).

In general, this study supports and extends previous work (Banerjee, 2002; Juvonen & Murdock, 1993, 1995) indicating that children are likely to recommend different self-presentations in social situations depending on the type of audience (peer versus adult). Importantly, although this work provides support for the notion that the value of modest self-presentations is first learned in the context of peer relationships, further work is necessary to identify more precisely the mechanisms by which children come understand modesty as a self-presentational tactic. Researchers must build on these preliminary findings in three key ways. First, a wider variety of social-contextual cues needs to be addressed. Social psychological research with adults has shown that more subtle distinctions in audience type (e.g., familiar vs. unfamiliar audiences; see Tice, Butler, Muraven, & Stillwell, 1995) may influence the use of modest self-presentation, while much broader socialisation practices may be responsible for cross-cultural variation in children's judgements about modesty (Lee et al., 2001).   Second, consistent with the growing interest in theoretical frameworks that connect

children's social understanding with their experience of social interaction (e.g., see Carpendale & Lewis, 2004; Dunn, 1996), research should directly assess the ecological validity of the self-presentation task, identifying relevant patterns of reasoning and behaviour in real-life contexts. Finally, longitudinal work can elucidate the causal relations among aspects of the child's social experience in multiple settings (e.g., family, school, play) and their reasoning about self-presentational processes. Indeed, such research could help identify the social antecedents and consequences of using and understanding modesty as a self-presentational tactic.

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Appendix 1

Sample Modesty Story

This is Tim (Tracy). Tim just scored a goal for his football team. His team-mate [OR coach]

went up to him and said, "Tim, good goal." And then Tim replied, "Well, I only got it

because my team helped set it up." OR "Of course, I'm the best."

> *Modesty approval judgment question:*
>
> Now remember, Tim said, "Well, I only got it because my team helped set it up."
>
> *[modest response]* Was that a good thing for him to say? (yes/no)
>
> *Justification question:*
>
> If answer to approval judgment question is 'yes': Why was it a good thing to say? *OR*
>
> If answer to approval judgment question is 'no': Why was it not a good thing for him
>
> to say?

The other seven stories concern the following contexts:

> playing a video game well
>
> winning a tennis match
>
> swimming fast
>
> doing well on a maths quiz
>
> doing a good painting
>
> doing well on spelling
>
> performing well in drama

Table 1

Mean modesty approval scores for both age groups, by audience type.

	Audience type	
	Peers	Adults
Age Group	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*
8- to 9-year-olds (N = 47)	2.45 (1.10)	2.06 (1.09)
10- to 11-year-olds (N = 45)	2.91 (0.97)	2.69 (1.20)
Total	2.67 (1.06)	2.37 (1.18)

Table 2

Mean number of each justification type across the eight stories, by age group (SDs in parentheses).

Age group	Social Evaluation	Social Outcome	Others' Feelings	Truth	Residual
8- to 9-year-olds (N = 47)	1.23 (1.86)	0.15 (0.42)	0.21 (0.59)	5.53 (2.32)	0.87 (1.19)
10- to 11-year-olds (N = 45)	2.42 (2.21)	0.58 (1.03)	0.42 (1.14)	3.71 (2.48)	0.84 (1.68)