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Children's sensitivity to circular explanations

Laura A. Baum, Judith H. Danovitch, and Frank C. Keil

Department of Psychology, Yale University

Abstract

The ability to evaluate the quality of explanations is an essential part of children's intellectual growth. Explanations can be faulty in structural ways, such as when they are circular. A circular explanation reiterates the question as if it were an explanation rather than providing any new information. Two experiments ($n = 77$) examined children's preferences when faced with circular and non-circular explanations. The results demonstrate that a preference for noncircular explanations is present, albeit in a fragile form, by age five or six and that it appears robustly by age ten. Thus, the ability to evaluate the quality of explanations based on structural grounds appears to develop rapidly during the elementary school years.

Keywords

circularity; structural properties; explanation; knowledge acquisition; middle childhood; cognitive development

Young children will often ask why things are the way they are or how things work, and they ask about an enormous range of objects around them (Callanan & Jipson, 2001; Greif, Kemler Nelson, Keil, & Gutierrez, 2006). Moreover, they are often unsatisfied with the first explanation offered and may ask for further explanations, repeating the cycle until they either reach a point where they feel a compelling explanation has been offered or they give up in frustration. This report explores the types of explanations children find satisfying. More specifically, we ask how children become sensitive to certain structural features that make some explanations better than others by examining children's evaluation of circular arguments.

Although existing research has examined what makes some arguments better than others (e.g., Kuhn, 1992), what makes certain ideas more persuasive than others (e.g., Cialdini, 1993), and what kinds of inconsistencies children notice (e.g., Markman, 1979), these studies have tended to focus on the content of the statements rather than on more abstract structural principles associated with good and bad explanations. Less common has been work on the logical structure of sentences, such as Osherson and Markman's (1975) work on contradictions and tautologies and Braine and Romain's (1980) work on the development of the understanding of "or." Here we focus on another structural aspect of explanations that may influence judgments of their quality: circularity.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Judith Danovitch, Child Study Center, Yale School of Medicine, 40 Temple St. Suite 71, New Haven, Connecticut 06510. E-mail: Judith.Danovitch@yale.edu.

Laura A. Baum is now at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. Judith H. Danovitch is now at Child Study Center, Yale School of Medicine.

¹This example raises the intriguing question of whether children find supernatural explanations more appealing than scientific-causal explanations (see Bering, 2006, for a review of the literature on children's beliefs in supernatural events).

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Circular arguments are statements that draw a conclusion by reiterating the information assumed in the original question or claim without adding any meaningful new information. They can be short and simple, such as “a can opener works by opening the can” or longer and more complex, such as “a can opener works by taking the lid off the can so that the top of the can has come off.” As adults we often unwittingly accept and create complex circular arguments, but we also reject the simplest ones as completely uninformative, raising questions about the origins of this ability and its relationship to metalinguistic skills. Adults are sensitive to elements such as verbatim repetition and paraphrasing as an indication of an argument’s circularity, yet even they display limitations in their ability to recognize pragmatic factors that influence whether an argument is truly circular (Rips, 2002). A better sense of how children’s abilities might emerge comes from a brief consideration of prior work on metalinguistic and metacognitive reasoning.

Since explanations are embedded in language, the ability to evaluate structural properties of explanations relies on some degree of metalinguistic skill. Children as young as 2 years old show rudimentary metalinguistic functioning when they are asked to give judgments of grammaticality in modeling situations. By 5 to 8 years of age, children are able to give judgments of nonstandard sentences and explain why they judge some sentences as deviant (Gleitman, Gleitman, & Shipley 1972). This more elaborated ability may be critical in evaluating structural flaws in explanations.

Multiple sources suggest that the ability to evaluate explanations develops between 5 and 10 years of age. For example, Ruffman (1999) demonstrated that when listening to longer passages, children under 6 years of age show difficulty detecting logical inconsistencies, such as that the same character could be both tall and short, and that this was not a result of memory limitations. Studies on evaluations of the coherence of text passages also show developmental patterns during this period (Markman, 1977; Anderson & Beal, 1995).

One particularly relevant line of research on children’s awareness of structural features examined children’s ability to evaluate contradictions and tautologies (Osherson & Markman, 1975). Unlike statements in which truth value is determined by context, a tautological sentence is true by virtue of its logical form, and a contradictory sentence is false by virtue of its logical form. When 8 year olds were asked whether they thought the information in tautologies and contradictions was “true,” “false,” or something about which they “can’t tell,” they had difficulty evaluating both the contradictions and the tautologies. Because some statements containing non-tautologous and non-contradictory statements such as “either this chip is green or it is blue” and “this chip is yellow and it is not red” were readily understood, the difficulty of these statements did not seem to be caused by problems with the logical words used. Rather, children indiscriminately sought empirical evidence even though contradictions and tautologies are inherently non-empirical (i.e., no empirical evidence is required to falsify or verify contradictions and tautologies). Resisting the tendency to ask for empirical support for non-empirical sentences requires an ability to examine the form of the statement itself.

In addition to the work on contradictions and tautologies, circular arguments are also closely related to necessarily true sets of statements. Russell (1982) found that, by age 5, children could distinguish between necessarily true and empirically testable sentences. This suggests that quite young children might be able to evaluate circular arguments when used as explanations, even when they concern relatively novel phenomena. The studies presented here build on this earlier work by asking children which explanations are inherently more satisfactory, rather than simply asking them to discriminate between necessarily true and false statements. In many contexts, the naturalistic evaluation of an explanation’s quality may be central to understanding why some answers are satisfying to children and others are not.

Existing research indicates that the ability to evaluate the coherence and explanatory value of statements, passages, and bodies of text may rest on a continuum. Even preschoolers can perform well on some tasks (Revelle, Wellman, & Karabenick, 1985), while adults will miss inconsistencies and other problems in longer and more complex bodies of text (Graesser, Kessler, Kreuz, & McLain-Allen, 1998). Circular arguments may be an important intermediate case. Because of their structural properties, circular explanations cannot go below a certain threshold of complexity, one that may be beyond the grasp of preschoolers and perhaps young elementary school children as well. At the same time, these structural features are ones that can be of considerable use in judging explanations and deciding whether to ask further questions, especially in cases where knowledge of content is weak. It is possible to know an explanation is inadequate on structural grounds without understanding the explanatory details. Thus, reliance on structural properties may influence children to prefer some explanations over others in situations of near complete ignorance about the topic.

It appears likely that children are often provided with empty explanations. When confronted with a series of “why” questions that they cannot answer, exasperated adults may give empty explanations of the form “because that is the way it is” or “because it has always been that way.” At some point children must learn that these “explanations” are of little value. For these reasons, it is important to ask how the ability to evaluate explanations in this manner develops.

Although previous research has often used open-ended probes (e.g., Markman, 1977; Markman, 1979), there are such great individual differences among children in whether they request information in general that a forced-choice method may provide a clearer measure of their underlying abilities. Moreover, since children often perform better when they are forewarned about text problems (Zabrucky & Ratner, 1986), in the current studies, children were told that there are two people, one of whom knows more than the other, thereby making the children sensitive to the fact that one of the explanations should strike them as less acceptable. Finally, given memory load issues in related tasks, the current studies decreased memory demands by using visual cues, repeating items on request, and by asking questions to ensure that children remembered the necessary information.

Experiment 1

Method

Participants—Seventeen kindergarten children (10 males; $M = 5$ years 8 months) were interviewed individually in a quiet room at an elementary school in the New Haven area or in a laboratory at Yale University. Children were predominantly middle and upper-middle class Caucasian-Americans.

Materials and Procedure—The experimenter began with the following instructions: “I’m going to tell you about three people who think they know about something. One of them knows a lot more than the others. I want you to tell me who you think knows the most; who’s the smartest?” The experimenter made it clear that although each explanation had the speaker’s name with it, the child did not personally know any of the speakers. Also, the experimenter told each participant that if the participant wanted to hear any item repeated, the experimenter would be happy to repeat it upon request.

The experimenter then read each item and the accompanying options out loud, saying “I have three people who think they know about [topic]. Here’s what they say.” For each phenomenon, participants heard a short circular explanation, a long circular explanation, and a noncircular explanation (see Table 1). The short circular explanation did not provide any new information and was as short as possible (e.g., “a can opener works because it opens the can”). The long circular explanation also did not provide any new information but included more words (e.g.,

“a can opener works because it does something that takes the lid off so that when you are finished using the can opener, the top of the can has come off”). The noncircular explanation contained approximately the same number of words as the long circular explanation, but provided a real causal explanation (e.g., “a can opener works because it has a sharp wheel that cuts the lid and another wheel that goes under the lid of the can and turns it so that it can get cut”). These explanations were drawn primarily from science magazines and books (e.g., Macaulay, 1988). All items were pilot-tested with 27 adults who preferred the noncircular explanation 95% of the time.

Each explanation was presented in a small booklet with the hypothetical speaker’s name printed on the cover, and the explanation printed on the inside. Participants could indicate their choice by saying the person’s name or by pointing to the booklet. There was a total of nine items. For at least one item chosen at random, the experimenter asked the participant why the participant chose a particular explanation. Also, the experimenter periodically asked the participant if he or she remembered what the explanations said. The choices for each item were arranged in three random orders and the items were in two random orders, resulting in a total of six versions of the task.

Results and discussion

Kindergarteners chose the short circular explanation 16.99% of the time, the long circular explanation 30.72% of the time, and the noncircular explanation 52.29% of the time. When tested against chance levels (33.33%), children selected the noncircular explanations at levels far above chance, $t(16) = 6.06$, $p < .0001$. They selected the short circular explanation at below chance levels, $t(16) = 4.826$, $p < .0001$, and the long circular explanations at chance levels, $t(16) = 0.939$, $p = .362$. Paired sample t-tests also revealed significant differences between the rates of selecting each type of explanation. There was no effect of item order, suggesting that children did not select explanations based on the order in which they were presented.

These results reveal that kindergartners prefer certain explanations over others. They rarely chose the short circular explanation, the explanation that adults were also least likely to choose. Likewise, kindergarteners chose the noncircular explanations at rates well above chance, suggesting that they consider circular arguments to be less satisfactory than noncircular ones. This suggests that even young children are not fooled by explanations that are circular, regardless of their length, and they expect that an explanation will provide them with new information.

The comments that participants made also suggest that certain explanations immediately strike young children as less satisfactory. In particular, when participants heard the short circular explanation, they would often make spontaneous remarks such as “that’s stupid!,” “it’s obviously not that,” or “it’s either that [noncircular] or that [long circular].” Although this reaction may have been partially based on the length of the explanation, the fact that children also preferred noncircular explanations to circular explanations of approximately equal length suggests that children recognize that circular explanations lack value compared to other options. Despite these relatively strong intuitions, kindergarteners still chose the noncircular explanations at rates far lower than adults, suggesting that it is important to examine how the ability to evaluate circular explanations emerges during the elementary school years.

Experiment 2

The purpose of Experiment 2 was to examine how the ability to detect circularity emerges across a broader range of ages. Because both adults and young children were so unlikely to choose the short circular explanation in Experiment 1, this explanation was eliminated from Experiment 2.

Method

Participants—Nineteen kindergartners (9 male; $M = 6$ years 1 month), 24 second graders (14 male; $M = 8$ years 3 months) and 17 fourth graders (9 male; $M = 10$ years 4 months) were interviewed in a quiet room at an elementary school in the New Haven area. Participants were predominantly middle and upper-middle class Caucasian-Americans.

Materials and Procedure—The same procedure was followed as in Experiment 1, except that the participants were presented with only two choices for each question: the noncircular explanation and the long circular explanation.

Results and discussion

When presented with two options of equal length, the kindergartners chose the noncircular explanation 49.71% of the time. Second graders chose the noncircular explanation 67.13% of the time. Fourth graders chose the noncircular explanation 84.97% of the time. For further analyses, subjects were assigned a score of 0 to 9 based on the number of times they chose the noncircular explanation. Using this total score, an ANOVA found significant differences among the three age group, $F(2,59) = 21.197$, $p < .001$. Post-hoc Scheffé tests showed significant differences between each grade group at the $p < .004$ level or smaller. Participants were more likely to choose the noncircular explanation in fourth grade than they were in second grade, and they were more likely to choose the noncircular explanation in second grade than when they were in kindergarten (see Figure 1).

In order to ascertain whether each age group's performance on this task was related to the linguistic complexity of the explanations, we calculated the Flesch Reading Ease Score (Flesch, 1948) for each of the circular and noncircular explanations. There were no significant differences between scores for the two types of explanations ($M = 81.5$ for circular and $M = 85.1$ for noncircular explanations), indicating that the explanations were of equal difficulty in terms of readability. We also tested whether the difference in scores (indicating if each noncircular explanation differed in readability from the corresponding circular explanation) for each item correlated with preferences for the noncircular explanation at each grade level and found no significant correlations. Thus, it is unlikely that children were basing their choices on the linguistic complexity of each explanation, but rather it appears that they were actually focusing on the content of the explanation. Additional analyses also demonstrated that there were no effects of the order of the questions and explanation choices on children's preferences, suggesting that preferences were not based on differential memory for each of the explanation options.

A particularly striking finding in Experiment 2 is that the kindergartners only performed at chance. This is a decrease in their performance from Experiment 1 where they chose the noncircular explanation at rates that were well above chance. Despite the task instructions that one of the answers would be silly, kindergartners may not be attuned to these kinds of distinctions unless they are given more salient cases of circularity upon which to build. In Experiment 1, children may have viewed the short circular explanation as so ridiculous that it made them more sensitive when examining the other two explanations. Since Experiment 2 did not include an explanation that was as blatantly inadequate as the short circular explanations, participants might not have been as sensitive in their evaluations.

General Discussion

Some explanations are inherently more satisfactory to both children and adults. Adults and children as young as kindergartners are sensitive to the fact that noncircular explanations are superior to circular ones, but this ability remains fragile until the later elementary school years.

Moreover, these effects do not appear to be related to memory limitations nor are they explained by differences in the linguistic complexity of the explanations.

Any difficulties that kindergarteners experienced on this task were not likely to be caused by problems in remembering the explanations. Children usually answered affirmatively that they remembered what had been said and were able to repeat or paraphrase the statement. The children were also given visual cues (i.e., the booklets that contained the explanations), and they were also able to ask for an item to be repeated if they could not remember it. Experiment 1 presents the most convincing evidence that memory does not play a key role in the participants' performance. In that experiment, participants needed to remember an additional character and information, as there was an additional explanation. However, it is in that study that kindergarteners showed the strongest preference for noncircular explanations.

The participants' comments also revealed that they were not simply identifying longer explanations as *better* explanations. For instance, a fourth grader who had difficulty choosing an explanation on the item about why identical twins look exactly alike commented that "Well, Courtney [the circular explanation] kinda describes them more, but Katie [the noncircular explanation] gives a reason. I don't know. [Pauses.] Katie said there's a recipe, and Courtney gives a reason. But that's what they're trying to ask you – why their faces are the same, so ... I think Katie's right." This monologue reveals that the participant was looking for an explanation that went beyond a reiteration of the original question. This may be how children approach this task. They seem to ask themselves, "Have I learned anything new from this information?" Consider as another example a second grader who chose the noncircular explanation for why sleeping pills work because "he tells more description why it works." A more articulate second grader explained his choice of the noncircular sleeping pill explanation by saying, "Because Steve is just saying *that* they work; he's just saying there's a chemical in it; John is explaining how it makes the person tired." These comments suggest that children are attending to the nature of the information being provided, rather than relying on more simple heuristics of answer length or complexity.

One clue into the origins of the developmental trends seen in these experiments consists of children's own comments on their choices. Even when children indicated that they preferred a noncircular explanation, those participants often made comments that were actually circular themselves. For example, when asked why he chose the noncircular explanation for why leaves change color in the fall, a kindergartener responded, "because I think she's right." This child's response did not provide the experimenter with any new information and can certainly be considered circular, even though the child rejected circular explanations in the task. Like adults, children may often have strong intuitions about one explanation offering more insight than another but be unable to articulate why; additional research into children's explanations for their choices is necessary to clarify this possibility.

Another interesting observation was that when some of the children heard the initial question statement, they spontaneously indicated that they knew the answer. The experimenter allowed them to express their thoughts and, in most cases, their explanations were not accurate. For example, a 6 year old male explained that leaves change color in the fall "because God sends his angels down to paint them." Nevertheless, when this child heard the given explanations, he still chose the noncircular explanation. It is not the case, then, that children need to understand a phenomenon completely in order to choose which explanation they find more plausible. In fact, it may be more informative to examine how children react to explanations of unfamiliar concepts, since young children encounter so many of these situations, and since it would presumably be easier to fool a child into believing an implausible explanation when the child has less background knowledge about a particular topic.

It is important to note that children's ability to assess the accuracy of their own explanations also develops between kindergarten and fourth grade (Mills & Keil, 2004). Perhaps this improving awareness of their own understanding plays a role in children's ability to evaluate inconsistencies in other's explanations. This possibility could be addressed in future research by having children provide and evaluate their own explanations along with evaluating other's explanations. Similarly, another factor that may be underpinning performance in our tasks is that children's metalinguistic skills continue to improve during this time period (Ferreira & Morrison, 1994). In the future, it would be beneficial to measure metalinguistic abilities in conjunction with preferences for different types of explanations in order to assess exactly what role an understanding of language plays when evaluating explanations.

Our results suggest a potentially valuable educational intervention as well. One way to teach children how to more carefully evaluate sentences may be to give them examples of explanations that are clearly unsatisfactory, such as the short circular explanations in Experiment 1, and then build up to using explanations that may be harder to evaluate. Even in college-level instruction, it is often common to try to illustrate subtle circularities in complex arguments by pointing out their more blatant counterparts in much more abbreviated examples. Thus, it may well be that encounters with very simple cases of circularity provide children with insights that they can then use as a new platform for evaluating more complex arguments on the same grounds.

It is important to further explore cases where children accept an explanation that adults would not consider satisfactory, especially cases where they have relatively little knowledge about the phenomena involved. In conjunction with ongoing research on how children come to understand the distribution of knowledge (see Keil, 2006) and evaluate potential sources of information (see Harris, 2007), our current findings suggest that it is also important to consider how children evaluate the answers that they receive. From classrooms to courtrooms to clinics, the question of how children come to know that an explanation is unsatisfactory is of central interest. Anecdotally, many parents know that their children constantly ask "why?" These studies may be a first step in knowing how they learn to stop.

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Figure 1.
Children's preferences for non-circular explanations in Experiment 2.

Table 1

Sample stimuli (Full set of stimuli is available upon request)

QUESTION	CIRCULAR EXPLANATION		NONCIRCULAR EXPLANATION
	LONG	SHORT	
These people think they know why polar bears have white fur. Which one do you think knows the most?	They have white fur because the color in their fur is white, not black or another color. All polar bears are white; you will not see one that is a different color.	They have white fur because their fur is always white.	They have white fur because they live in snowy places. Since the snow is white, it's hard for the bears' enemies to find it and hurt it. So, the white bears live longer, and they make more white bears.
These people think they know how dishwashers work. Which one do you think knows the most?	They work because the inside of the machine is really good at washing things. When you put your dishes and silverware inside and turn the dishwasher on, it makes them really clean.	They work because they make things that you put in them clean.	They work because they spray hot water from lots of directions and it reaches all the dishes and silverware inside. They then get rinsed by clean water and then the machine dries them.