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What does it mean to be smart? The development of children's beliefs about intelligence in Germany and the United States

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Abstract

Kindergarten, second, fifth, and eighth graders from Germany and the United States participated in structured interviews concerning their beliefs about the nature of intelligence. In both countries, older children were more likely than younger children to link intelligence exclusively to cognitive (rather than noncognitive) abilities, to project an inverse relationship between ability and effort expenditure on academic tasks, and to view intelligence as fixed. U.S. children, in contrast to Germans, were more likely to believe that smart children work harder than children who are less smart, and to argue that intelligence is malleable. Results are discussed in terms of cultural/contextual influences on the development of children's naïve theories about intelligence and implications for educational policy.

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1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, researchers have begun to compile a body of knowledge regarding children's conceptions of intelligence. Children's developing beliefs may be viewed as complex

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“theories” that not only include the child’s concept of what constitutes intelligent behavior, but comprise a network of interrelated beliefs that the child uses to make coherent predictions, inferences, and explanations of ability-related experiences (Kinlaw & Kurtz-Costes, 2003). In this paper we examine four aspects of children’s theories that have received particular attention by researchers: children’s definitions of intelligence (e.g., Cain & Dweck, 1995; Yussen & Kane, 1985), their association of various criteria or signs as characteristic of intelligent people (e.g., Droege & Stipek, 1993; Yussen & Kane, 1985), children’s views of the relationship between effort and ability (e.g., Dweck & Bempechat, 1983; Nicholls, 1978), and beliefs about the malleability of ability (e.g., Stipek & Daniels, 1988).

The purpose of this study was to test the generality of previous findings. Because most of the research in children’s beliefs about intelligence has been conducted in the United States, it is unclear to what extent these results are culturally limited. In the current study we contrast individual and developmental differences between children in the U.S. and children in Germany. As a Western, technologically developed nation, Germany is closer culturally to the U.S. than many other countries. However, the differing educational systems and occupational mobility in the two countries along with greater ethnic and social class diversity in the U.S. might lead to differences in children’s naïve theories about the nature of intelligence. In the following, we first review research conducted in the U.S. regarding children’s beliefs about intelligence. Next, we summarize literature about the beliefs of German children. We conclude with a statement of our research questions.

1.1. Definitions of intelligence and characteristics of intelligent people

Children’s definitions of intelligence have been directly assessed by asking them such questions as “What does it mean to be smart/intelligent?” (Yussen & Kane, 1985) and “What does it mean to be smart, in [your] schoolwork?” (Cain & Dweck, 1995). Results of these studies show that children from first through sixth grade recognize that cognitive or mental abilities are associated with intelligence. For example, Yussen and Kane (1985) reported that children of all ages in their sample tended to include amount of knowledge in their definitions, and academic skill was increasingly identified as key to the definition of smartness across grades. However, developmental differences also emerge, with younger children more likely to include noncognitive characteristics such as social skills in their definitions.

This developmental difference has also been found when children are asked to explain their ratings of their own and others’ “smartness” and to identify the “signs” of intelligence. In a series of studies, Stipek and her colleagues (1981; Stipek & Daniels, 1990; Stipek & Tannatt, 1984) asked children to justify their ratings of smartness or predict performance in a variety of domains. Children of all ages (kindergarten through eighth grade) recognized that being smart was associated with reading and spatial abilities. However, younger children were more likely than older children to cite work habits, sociability, and athletic prowess (i.e. jumping) as characteristics of smart people. Other researchers have found that younger children seem to make global judgments of individuals, linking positive qualities in one realm (e.g., intelligence) to other realms (e.g., athletic ability), whereas older children are more likely to link intelligence strictly to cognitive skills and performance (Bempechat, London, & Dweck, 1991; Yussen & Kane, 1985). Thus, two findings from this prior research are examined in the current study: children’s association of cognitive and academic performance with intelligence, and developmental changes in the propensity to incorporate noncognitive qualities in definitions.

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