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Preschool children transfer real-world moral reasoning into pretense

Anne A. Fast^{a,*}, Jennifer Van Reet^b^a University of Washington, Department of Psychology, Box 351525, Seattle, WA 98105, United States^b Providence College, Department of Psychology, One Cunningham Square, Providence, RI 02918, United States

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ABSTRACT

Is it wrong to pretend to kick or pretend to steal? The current experiment examined whether preschoolers extend their moral principles from reality into pretense and whether this transfer depends on the proximity of the pretend world to the real world. Children are known to transfer their knowledge of object properties, causality, and problem solutions between pretend and real worlds. However, do children maintain their real-world moral reasoning in pretense? Preschoolers ($N = 63$) judged the acceptability of antisocial behaviors in pretend, fantastical, or non-pretend scenarios. Children found antisocial behaviors to be equally unacceptable in both pretend and non-pretend situations but found antisocial behaviors to be more acceptable in the fantastical situations. These results imply that children extend their real-world representations of morality in pretense, but more so for pretend scenarios that are similar to the real world. Implications for children's understanding of the reality-fantasy boundary and moral reasoning are discussed.

1. Introduction

Pretend play requires children to maintain representations of real-world knowledge while simultaneously thinking about and acting on ideas contradicting reality. For example, when a young child pretends to diagnose and cure her doll of an illness she is acting upon her knowledge of the real world (i.e., what doctors do to help people feel better), but at the same time she is ignoring her knowledge of the real world (i.e., the doll can get sick). Despite its complexity, children engage in pretend play themselves and understand the pretend play of others beginning around age two and children become increasingly successful at differentiating pretense from reality over the course of the preschool years (Bourchier & Davis, 2002; Corriveau, Kim, Schwalen, & Harris, 2009; Flavell, Flavell, & Green, 1983; Woolley & Cox, 2007).

On the surface, it seems children would risk changing their understanding of reality through manipulating and altering their representations of the real world in pretense. For example, by pretending to diagnose and cure her doll, might the young child come to believe that dolls can be ill? Theories of pretense representation have attempted to explain how children maintain a distinction between pretense and reality (e.g., Harris, 2000; Leslie, 1987; Lillard, 2001; Nichols, 2004; Perner, 1991). Leslie (1987) argued that pretend representations are created by first making, and then changing, a copy of a real representation, and Lillard (2001) theorized that pretend representations function like the philosopher's Twin Earth, a copy of reality which is modified only in a few specific way (s). These theorists further argue that using copies of real representations serves to ensure one's real-world knowledge is not affected by what happens in a pretend world. Thus, most theories recognize the importance of children's use of real-world knowledge in

* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, University of Washington, Box 351525, Seattle, WA 98195, United States.
E-mail address: afast@uw.edu (A.A. Fast).

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creating pretend representations, yet acknowledge the need for keeping pretend representations separate from real representations in order for children to maintain an accurate understanding of reality. Examining whether and when children transfer knowledge between pretend and real worlds will potentially shed light on how children represent the boundary between reality and non-reality and their understanding what information can pass between the two worlds.

In support of the theories concerning pretense representation, previous research suggests that children utilize some of their real knowledge, in particular objective knowledge about physical properties, while pretending. For example, a series of studies conducted by Harris and Kavanaugh (1993) examined children's awareness of the pretend-real distinction, including how children acknowledge when a pretend scenario has begun and how they maintain rules of causality during pretense. After watching an experimenter pretend to spill milk, children as young as two years of age were able to correctly follow along with the scenario by pretending to clean up the spill in the correct location. Harris, Kavanaugh, and Meredith (1994) showed that children are not limited to only a single causal transformation; they are able to connect multiple causal relationships to create causal chains and can determine the outcome of these chains. The fact that children use their real-world understanding of objective causal relationships in order to make inferences throughout pretend play makes clear that the pretend-reality boundary is porous in at least one direction, allowing real-world information into pretense.

More recent empirical work also supports the hypothesis that young children's reasoning about pretense is "grounded" in their understanding of reality (for review, see Lillard & Woolley, 2015). Lane and colleagues (2016) show that children's ability to imagine improbable and impossible events was related to whether or not they believe those events can actually take place in the real world. This finding suggests that the forms of pretense that children engage in are largely tied to their knowledge about reality. In another study, 3- to 5-year-olds both protested and corrected pretend actions that did not align with their knowledge about what is factually true in the world, such as a duck saying "oink", indicating that children are concerned about and motivated toward maintaining real-world information in pretense (Van de Vondervoort & Friedman, 2017).

Previous work on the transfer of information between pretend and real worlds has been focused on the transfer of general knowledge (e.g., facts, words) or physical rules (e.g., cups filled with liquid will spill when tipped over). Therefore, it is unknown whether real-world *social* knowledge, such as moral evaluation, is maintained in pretense. Since antisocial actions do not have any physical consequences in the pretend world (i.e., pretending to kick someone will not physically hurt them and pretending to steal from someone will not leave them with fewer resources), perhaps children would not utilize their real-world moral understanding when evaluating these pretend behaviors. On the other hand, infants are known positively evaluate prosocial individuals and negatively evaluate antisocial individuals (DesChamps, Eason, & Sommerville, 2015; Hamlin, Wynn, & Bloom, 2007; Meristo & Surian, 2014) and children continue to object to antisocial behaviors into the preschool years (Smetana, 1981, 2006). Theorists have argued that children's evaluations of others are rooted in early-developing, strong, and unchanged beliefs about how others should behave morally (Hamlin, 2013; Smetana, 1981, 2006), perhaps suggesting that children would maintain their real-world moral evaluation even in a pretend world.

Further, pretending ability has been theoretically and empirically linked to children's understanding of others' minds (e.g., Lillard, 1993; Taylor & Carlson, 1997). Although the exact mechanism driving this correlation is an open question, hypotheses have included that (1) both abilities rely on the same representational ability, and/or (2) that the experience of pretending allows children to practice seeing the world from others' perspectives and experience different mental states. If the latter is true, experimenting with or being tolerant of others' experimentation with moral rules in pretend worlds may be a way children use or refine their social knowledge and skills. For example, children may allow pretend stealing to occur in order to experience or observe the motivations and emotions of a thief and the consequences of the action based on experiencing or observing the reaction of a victim. In order to understand young children's treatment of moral issues in pretend play, we sought to test whether or not preschool children judge antisocial and prosocial behaviors similarly across pretend and non-pretend contexts.

Further, although previous work indicates that young children's pretense seems to be largely grounded in their understanding of reality, there is one key factor that might influence children's tendency to use real-world knowledge in their reasoning about pretense—how similar the pretend world is to reality. Walker, Ganea, and Gopnik (2015) examined children's treatment of the boundary between pretense and reality by testing children's tendency to transfer information in the opposite direction—from a pretend world to the real world—and whether the transfer of information in this direction depends on how similar the pretend and real worlds are to one another. After exposing preschoolers to a novel causal process using a close world (less fantastical) or far world (more fantastical) version of a story, they found that children were more likely to generalize the novel causal relation from the more realistic stories compared to the very fantastical stories. Thus, preschoolers are not only sensitive to the degree to which pretend worlds differ from the real world, but that they rely on these proximity judgments to guide their decisions about whether to transfer objective knowledge from a pretend world to the real one.

An open question is whether children also take proximity into account when transferring real-world knowledge into pretense. It may be that children are also less likely to transfer their real-world knowledge to a pretend world when that pretend world is distant from reality (i.e., fantastical). Therefore, a second aim of the current work was to test whether children's transfer of real-world moral reasoning into pretense depends on the proximity of the pretend world to reality in order to further specify children's understanding of the pretense-reality distinction.

2. The current study

The current study examined whether children's real-world knowledge—specifically, their moral evaluation—is maintained in a pretend world and whether this transfer depends on the proximity of the pretend world to the real world. To this end, preschool

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