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Ho! Ho! Who? Parent promotion of belief in and live encounters with Santa Claus

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ABSTRACT

There is a long enduring lay notion that children must be taught the difference between fiction and reality. Yet, cultural fictional characters such as Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy are widely promoted as real. With Santa Claus, children are faced with an additional conundrum: multiple live versions of Santa Claus seen at malls, museums and parades. In two studies we investigate how and when children come to understand this live version of a fictional, magical character. In both studies, we find parents are highly promoting of the live Santa as real, regardless of child age. In Study 1, we find the more live Santas children are exposed to, the more they believe a live Santa is the real Santa. In Study 2, we find the more parents promote Santa Claus, the less likely children are to question who live Santa is. Taken together, findings indicate parental promotion of Santa does not change much with age, and that amount of Santa promotion is negatively associated with understanding this live version of a fictional character.

1. Introduction

There is a long-standing and enduring lay notion that children live in fantasy worlds, and must eventually grow out of them. Early developmental psychologists such as Piaget (1962) supported this notion. However, recent research shows that children draw a clear line between what is fictional and what is real (Harris, 2000; Woolley, 1997) and even between different types of fictional worlds (Skolnick & Bloom, 2006; Weisberg & Bloom, 2009). Children begin to make the fantasy-reality distinction by ages 3 or 4 (Woolley & Cox, 2007), and use a number of sources and cues to do so, including testimony from their parents and peers, their understanding of context, and their knowledge of the real world (Sharon & Woolley, 2004; Vanderborght & Jaswal, 2009; Woolley & E Ghossainy, 2013).

Paradoxically, American children of these same ages show high levels of belief in fictional characters, particularly culturally endorsed characters such as Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny (Anderson & Prentice, 1994; Clark, 1995; Prentice, Manosevitz, & Hubbs, 1978; Prentice, Schmechel, & Manosevitz, 1979; Rosengren, Kalish, Hickling, & Gelman, 1994). In fact, throughout preschool, children become more credulous about fantasy and fictional characters, believing in more characters when they are 4 and 5 years old than when they are 3 years old (Sharon & Woolley, 2004). This is a puzzle: even though parents (and children) draw a clear line between what is fictional and what is real, children still believe in these characters. How is this possible? One explanation focuses on the role of parental and cultural testimony. Preschool aged children

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show some lingering confusion regarding causal principles across the fiction-reality border, accepting (Subbotsky, 2004) and using (Phelps & Woolley, 1994) magical explanations for anomalous events and denying the possibility of improbable events (Shtulman & Carey, 2007). Because children's fantasy-reality differentiation is still developing during the preschool years, they may be especially vulnerable to misleading testimony about the reality status of Santa Claus and other fantasy figures. Indeed, parents who explicitly endorse Santa Claus or other fictional characters have children who believe in them (Prentice et al., 1978; Rosengren et al., 1994).

It does not take much evidence for many children to believe in a fictional character—far less than is provided for Santa Claus. In previous work, children were found to believe in a new fictional character, the Candy Witch (who exchanges candy for toys on Halloween), after a few visits from experimenters discussing the Candy Witch, and a single visit from the Witch on Halloween (Woolley, Boerger, & Markman, 2004). Santa is presented far more often to children and in many more ways. The additional cultural pressure to believe in fictional characters is also strong at this age. For example, Prentice and Gordon (1987) found that even a number of Jewish children they tested believed in Santa Claus.

In our studies, we focus on live versions of Santa Claus seen around Christmas time. Representations of fictional characters are one critical way in which children may be forced to consider reality status. As noted above, the majority of studies in this domain have addressed the ontological status of fictional characters. However, in a comprehensive study of children's use of the words "really" and "real," Bunce and Harris (2008), found that 2- to 7-year-olds rarely commented on ontological status (e.g., "monsters are not real"); instead they often made statements about the authenticity of representations of fictional characters (e.g., "He's not the real Father Christmas"). Among 4- to 7-year-olds, authenticity uses made up 63% of children's utterances whereas ontology uses comprised only 29%. Thus it is striking that few, if any, studies have addressed the issue of the authenticity of live representations of fictional characters. Children's understanding of live Santa Claus representations may be central to their thinking and reasoning about what is real and what is not real.

Children do eventually come to understand these characters as fictional. However the question of how this understanding begins is still underexplored. It may be that as children age, parental testimony about Santa changes or decreases, and children's beliefs follow suit (Harris, Pasquini, Duke, Asscher, & Pons, 2006). A second possibility, however, is that testimony stays consistent across age, and instead, as children develop cognitively in other areas, such as in their lay understanding of physics and biology, they begin to understand that key aspects of the Santa myth violate naïve theories and that he must be fictional in the same way fairies and monsters are fictional. Here, the level of parental promotion matters less for children's beliefs than their own understanding of the world (Shtulman & Yoo, 2015).

One potential way to solve this conflict is to take a closer look at parental promotion of fantasy figures. This promotion can include both parental testimony about the reality status of these figures and the experiences parents provide for children. In regards to verbal testimony and semantics, there is evidence to suggest that parents (and siblings) talk to children differently about fictional entities than about real entities (Canfield & Ganea, 2014), and that children can pick up on these varying cues to testimony (Woolley, Ma, & Lopez-Mobilia, 2011). Less research has investigated promotion of fantasy figures through the experiences parents create for their children and the types of behaviors in which parents themselves engage. We do not know if the amount of testimony about and experiences provided for fictional characters such as Santa Claus changes with the age of the child, and whether and how these changes may be related to children's questioning of the Santa Claus myth.

A few studies have addressed understanding of Santa as a case study of broader fictional character understanding, but findings are inconclusive. Previous work has found that the average age of discovery about Santa's fictional status is around 7 years old (Prentice et al., 1978), and that children learn Santa is not real gradually rather than at one moment in time (Anderson & Prentice, 1994). However, live Santa Clauses particularly are a strange phenomenon. Unlike taking children to the theater or to a movie, where it is understood that what they are about to experience is a show, a fictional performance put on for their enjoyment, Santa Claus at the mall is set up for children to engage with. In this way, he is similar to the fictional characters such as Cinderella or Elmo that children see at Disney World or Sesame Place—the difference being that parents and the culture at large experience and discuss such characters as fictional, whereas there is cultural pressure to discuss Santa as real. Children are expected to interact with the Santa at the mall as though he is the same person who will decide if they are naughty or nice and what to bring them on Christmas morning.

A potential source of confusion is the fact that children can be exposed to many different live Santa Clauses over the course of a few months. Children can go to the same mall multiple times (which may involve seeing the same or a new actor playing Santa), or go to multiple malls, museums, and private parties in which Santa may appear. The Santas in these locations are unlikely to be the same person. Added to this, a live Santa appears in the media in everything from jewelry commercials to the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade. In sum, even children who are not raised to believe in Santa see multiples of the same magical man over the course of a short period of time, and may have several opportunities to interact with him—a strange phenomenon developmental psychologists know little about. Intuitively, it may seem that seeing these multiple, different versions of one man would cause children to question Santa's reality status. Alternatively, however, seeing multiple versions of Santa in multiple places may be taken as evidence of Santa's magical abilities and supernatural status, thus reinforcing belief.

Research offers some insight into how children might respond to multiple Santas. Work by Gutheil, Gelman, Klein, Michos, and Kelaita (2008) shows that young children recognize that different instantiations of a storybook character (e.g., 2 Winnie the Pooh dolls) are representations of the same individual (Winnie the Pooh), but still have unique identities as a function of their spatio-temporal history. Research by Rhemtulla and Hall (2009) indicates that young children understand that multiple representations of a storybook character share certain properties as a function of their shared character identity, and also