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Cognitive Development



Is it real? The development of judgments about authenticity and ontological status



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ABSTRACT

We examined children's judgments of the real/not-real status of fictional characters given that such judgments can be based either on the ontological status of the character or on the authenticity of a representation of the character. Sixty 3 - 5 year-olds and 20 adults were shown paired photographs of fictional characters (e.g., Bob the Builder) and people dressing up as those characters (e.g., a person wearing a Bob the Builder costume). They were asked whether each depicted character lives in 'the real world' (ontology question) and whether each character is 'the real' fictional character (authenticity question), and why. As expected, younger children, and to some extent older children, made more accurate authenticity judgments than ontology judgments about the characters, whereas adults made accurate judgments in reply to both questions. Furthermore, younger children did not differentiate between the two questions in their justifications, unlike the older children and adults. Implications for the development of children's ability to make reality judgments about fictional characters are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Young children learn that characters and events from novels, television programs, blockbuster movies or computer games form an ontologically distinct category that we label as not real

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(Harris, 2000; Skolnick & Bloom, 2006; Woolley, 1997). They come to realize, for example, that Harry Potter is not a real schoolboy and that Bob the Builder could not really come to mend our roof.

Improvement occurs at around the age of 4 years in children's ability to categorize a range of characters and events as real or fantastical (Boerger, 2011; Bunce & Harris, 2013; Carrick & Quas, 2006; Corriveau, Kim, Schwalen, & Harris, 2009; Harris, Brown, Marriott, Whittall, & Harmer, 1991; Samuels & Taylor, 1994; Sharon & Woolley, 2004; Skolnick & Bloom, 2006; Tullos & Woolley, 2009; Woolley & Cox, 2007; Woolley, Boerger, & Markman, 2004). For example, nearly two thirds of 3-year-olds in a study by Sayfan and Lagattuta (2008) incorrectly endorsed the existence of imaginary creatures such as monsters and witches; this number dramatically reduced to just 6% of 5-year-olds. Similarly, Sharon and Woolley (2004) reported that 3-year-olds failed to categorize systematically a variety of real entities (e.g., dinosaurs, clowns, a child) and fictional characters (e.g., Santa Claus, a monster, Superman) as real or pretend, whereas 4–5-year-olds were more systematic. The critical test in such studies usually involves asking children whether or not an entity is real or pretend, or asking children to sort a variety of entities into containers that represent the categories real and pretend.

Although these findings are fairly consistent, they are limited in two ways. First, the category 'fictional character' is not homogenous. It includes characters that range from those whose actions are impossible in the real world (e.g., Harry Potter) to those whose actions are possible (e.g., Bob the Builder), and characters about whose status children are deliberately misled (e.g., Santa Claus) or alternatively reassured (e.g., monsters under the bed) (Harris, 2012). In a study by Boerger (2011), (83)% and 52% of 3–7-year-olds judged Santa Claus and fairies respectively as 'real', but witches were only judged as real 22% of the time. Similarly Bunce (2007) found that 80% of 3–4-year-olds categorized Father Christmas as real but only 45% judged Bob the Builder and Winnie the Pooh as 'real'. By implication, even if children can, in principle, distinguish fictional characters from real entities, they may not always apply that distinction.

A second issue is that the term 'real' is multifaceted. As a result, it is not always clear what children mean when they judge something as real (Woolley, 1997; Woolley & Wellman, 1990). For example, Woolley, Boerger, and Markman (2004) found that 66% of 3–5-year-olds judged a novel Halloween character (the Candy Witch) to be real, but children also judged their teacher to be real. As a result, the authors doubted that children meant the same thing when they judged that both were real.

Another way of making reality judgments is on the basis of authenticity, that is, whether something or someone is genuinely what they appear to be, as opposed to an imitation or fake. In a study of children's everyday uses of the word 'real', Bunce and Harris (2008) found that 2–7-year-olds rarely commented on the ontological status of fictional characters, e.g., "Monsters aren't real", but often made statements about the authenticity of representations of fictional characters, e.g., "He's not the real Father Christmas" and "I saw the real Darth Vader." Among the 4–7-year-olds, uses of the word 'real' were substantially more common in relation to authenticity than ontological status (63% vs. 29%). Therefore, a judgment about whether something is real or not could be made on the basis of authenticity (Is X a real one?) or ontological status (Does X live in the real world?). For example, in the study by Woolley et al. (2004), it is possible that children thought they were being asked whether the Candy Witch was an authentic example of a witch in contrast to a person dressing up and pretending to be a witch.

Several studies have shown that children can make accurate judgments on the basis of authenticity by the age of 3 years (Bunce & Harris, 2008, 2013; Flavell, Flavell, & Green, 1987; Harris, Kavanaugh, & Meredith, 1994; Woolley & Wellman, 1990). For example, in a study by Moll and Tomasello (2012), 3-year-olds correctly distinguished 'the real X' from an object that 'looks like X', and in a study by Harris et al. (1994), 2–3-year-olds affirmed that the cotton wool being used in a pretense scenario to represent milk was 'pretend' milk, not 'real' milk. Three-year-olds can also categorize appropriately real entities and toys as 'real' or 'not real' on the basis of authenticity, although there is an improvement between the ages of 3 and 4 years in children's ability to make these judgments for people dressing up (Bunce & Harris, 2013).

Taken together, this evidence suggests that it is important to further examine children's reality judgments about fictional characters to determine the basis for their judgments. This was partly achieved in a recent study by Bunce and Harris (2013), in which children were provided with a context in which to make the real/not-real judgment. In that study, fictional characters were presented

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