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Children's and adults' understanding of death: Cognitive, parental, and experiential influences

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the development of understanding of death in a sample of 4- to 11-year-old British children and adults (N = 136). It also investigated four sets of possible influences on this development: parents' religion and spiritual beliefs, cognitive ability, socioeconomic status, and experience of illness and death. Participants were interviewed using the "death concept" interview that explores understanding of the subcomponents of inevitability, universality, irreversibility, cessation, and causality of death. Children understood key aspects of death from as early as 4 or 5 years, and with age their explanations of inevitability, universality, and causality became increasingly biological. Understanding of irreversibility and the cessation of mental and physical processes also emerged during early childhood, but by 10 years many children's explanations reflected not an improved biological understanding but rather the coexistence of apparently contradictory biological and supernatural ideas—religious, spiritual, or metaphysical. Evidence for these coexistent beliefs was more prevalent in older children than in younger children and was associated with their parents' religious and spiritual beliefs. Socioeconomic status was partly related to children's biological ideas, whereas cognitive ability and experience of illness and death played less important roles. There was no evidence for coexistent thinking among adults,

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only a clear distinction between biological explanations about death and supernatural explanations about the afterlife.

Introduction

Understanding death is a complex and emotional process that involves the recognition of five key biological facts—the five death subcomponents, namely that (a) all humans will die one day (inevitability), (b) death applies to all living entities (universality), (c) death is permanent (irreversibility), (d) with death all physical and psychological functions stop (cessation), and (e) death is caused by the breakdown of bodily processes (causality) (Jaakkola & Slaughter, 2002; Speece & Brent, 1984).

Understanding of these subcomponents is acquired at different times and at different rates. Children as young as 5 years grasp the ideas that death is inevitable and irreversible, but most do not begin to understand universality and cessation until around 6 or 7 years (Lazar & Torney-Purta, 1991; Nguyen & Gelman, 2002; Panagiotaki, Nobes, Ashraf, & Aubby, 2015; Slaughter & Griffiths, 2007; Slaughter & Lyons, 2003). There is also evidence that children understand the cessation of physical processes (i.e., the body stops working) before they grasp the idea that mental processes, such as thoughts and emotions, also come to an end with death (Bering & Bjorklund, 2004; Bering, Hernandez Blasi, & Bjorklund, 2005; Misailidi & Kornilaki, 2015). Causality is a more abstract notion and usually the last to be acquired because it involves the understanding of complex processes leading to the body's breakdown (Slaughter & Griffiths, 2007). Children understand causality when thinking about plants as early as 4 years (e.g., Nguyen & Gelman, 2002), but causality of human death is typically not understood until as late as 8–10 years (Panagiotaki et al., 2015; Slaughter & Griffiths, 2007).

Learning about death occurs when children are exposed to biological facts about its inevitability, its irreversibility, and the cessation of physical and psychological processes. During this process, children also encounter different "supernatural" beliefs—embedded in religious traditions and cultures—that endorse the notions of the afterlife and spiritual world (Legare, Evans, Rosengren, & Harris, 2012). Examples include beliefs that the deceased continue to feel, think, and interact with the living; that the spirit or soul of the dead continues to exist in a different realm; and that the dead person is judged and either enjoys heaven and eternal life with God or punishment in hell. These supernatural beliefs have previously been defined as immature ways of thinking about death that contradict the superior "natural" explanations and are eventually replaced by them (Norris & Inglehart, 2004; Piaget, 1928; Preston & Epley, 2009). This view accepts natural explanations as the only mature way of understanding and explaining the subcomponents of death.

Recent evidence, however, suggests that natural and supernatural beliefs about unobservable phenomena, such as life, death, and the afterlife (Harris & Gimenez, 2005; Watson-Jones, Busch, Harris, & Legare, 2017) but also illness (Busch, Watson-Jones, & Legare, 2017; Legare & Gelman, 2009) and evolution (Evans & Lane, 2011; Evans, Legare, & Rosengren, 2011; Tenenbaum & Hohenstein, 2016), are not necessarily incompatible but often coexist in the same mind to explain the same phenomena (Gelman & Legare, 2011). For example, children may recognize that dead people cannot move or see because their bodies have stopped working but at the same time may believe that they dream or miss their children—a belief consistent with the notion that certain psychological processes persist after death. There is also evidence that this coexistence becomes more prevalent as children grow older and begin to entertain alternative ideas about death (Harris, 2011). Even adults—particularly those from religious and diverse cultural contexts—often endorse afterlife beliefs when reasoning about death (Lane, Zhu, Evans, & Wellman, 2016; Rosengren, Gutiérrez, & Schein, 2014b; Watson-Jones, Busch, & Legare, 2015).

A number of studies support this account. Harris and Gimenez (2005) asked 7- and 8-year-old and 10- to 12-year-old Spanish children whether certain biological and psychological processes persist