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Brief Report

Wishful thinking in preschoolers



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ABSTRACT

The current experiment sought to demonstrate the presence of wishful thinking—when wishes influence beliefs—in young children. A sample of 77 preschoolers needed to predict, eight times in a row, which of two plastic eggs, one containing one toy and the other containing three toys, would be drawn by a blinded experimenter. On the four trials in which the children could not keep the content of the egg drawn, they were equally likely to predict that either egg would be drawn. By contrast, on the four trials in which the children got to keep the content of the egg, they were more likely to predict that the egg with three toys would be drawn. Any effort the children exerted would be the same across conditions, so that this demonstration of wishful thinking cannot be accounted for by an effort heuristic. One group of children—a subgroup of the 5-year-olds—did not engage in wishful thinking. Children from this subgroup instead used the representativeness heuristic to guide their answers. This result suggests that having an explicit representation of the outcome inhibits children from engaging in wishful thinking in the same way as explicit representations constrain the operation of motivated reasoning in adults.

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Introduction

Children often seem to engage in wishful thinking, letting their desires influence their perception of reality and their predictions. For instance, children might say that they can accomplish impossible feats to achieve desirable goals. This propensity is often seen as being caused by a genuine cognitive

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confusion in which children would act as if their “desires [were] efficacious in themselves” (Piaget, 1930, p. 261). Explicit questions about children’s understanding of wishing have revealed that wishing is seen not as an ordinary desire but rather as an act with magical properties (Woolley, Phelps, Davis, & Mandell, 1999) that can affect physical reality (Vikan & Clausen, 1993; Woolley, Browne, & Boerger, 2006).

Other studies suggest that children’s wishes affect their predictions about their own performance, leading to overly optimistic predictions. For instance, even after a practice trial, 4-year-olds estimated that they would manage to throw nearly twice as many balls in a basket as they did in fact manage to throw in (Schneider, 1998, Experiment 1). Such optimistic predictions have been observed across many different tasks, whether physical (e.g., Plumert & Schwebel, 1997; Schneider, 1998; Schwebel & Plumert, 1999; Stipek & Hoffman, 1980; Stipek, Roberts, & Sanborn, 1984) or purely cognitive such as memory tasks (e.g., Lipko, Dunlosky, & Merriman, 2009; Shin, Bjorklund, & Beck, 2007). Moreover, children generally do not make such optimistic predictions when asked about others’ performance (Stipek, 1984; Stipek & Hoffman, 1980; but see Lipko et al., 2009), which might be explained by children not desiring others to perform well as much as they desire to perform well.

It has been suggested, however, that these behaviors might result not from genuine wishful thinking but rather from children’s reliance on an “effort heuristic” in which children fail to differentiate effort from ability (Stipek & MacIver, 1989; Wellman, 1985). For young children, the amount of effort one puts into a task would relate to one’s success at the task. Thus, when children invest a lot of effort in a task, expect to invest a lot of effort, or have reasons to believe that a peer has invested a lot of effort, they should predict good performance for themselves or their peer. In the tasks in which children have been found to make optimistic predictions, they always needed to expend some effort or could expect to do so—in accomplishing a physical act or in remembering something, for instance—so that the reliance on the effort heuristic could account for the results above. Moreover, children have much easier access to their own feelings of effort than to others’ feelings of effort. As a result, reliance on the effort heuristic can also account for the fact that children do not make overly optimistic predictions about others’ performance. Thus, the effort heuristic is a plausible explanation for all of the existing demonstrations of wishful thinking.

A first goal of the current experiment is to offer the first evidence of wishful thinking in children that could not be accounted for by the effort heuristic. To this end, it relies on a paradigm in which children neither exert nor expect to exert much, if any, effort. In previous experiments, children at least needed to engage in effortful cognitive activities such as remembering the location of 10 different objects. In the current experiment, they were only asked to take a guess. Moreover, in the current experiment, any effort exerted or expected would be identical across two conditions. By contrast, children should have wishes about the predicted outcome in only one of the two conditions. Any difference in the predictions between the conditions, thus, could be attributed to the effect of wishes.

Wishful thinking distorts one’s representation of the world and, therefore, has the potential to lead to poor decisions and to jeopardize one’s status as a competent agent. Indeed, this is true of the larger category of “motivated reasoning,” encompassing various mechanisms through which motivation affects reasoning (for a review, see Kunda, 1990). To mitigate its potential epistemic or social damages, motivated reasoning in adults is heavily modulated by participants’ explicit beliefs—that is, beliefs that can take a verbal form. For instance, although participants might wish that they were better at math, this wish does not seem to affect their representation of their mathematical abilities (Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989). Believing that one has high mathematical abilities when this is not the case would too blatantly conflict with one’s knowledge of, for instance, one’s grades in mathematics classes. By contrast, participants believe, on average, that they are smarter than average. In this case, one can more easily find a definition of intelligence (cultivated, street smart, socially apt, etc.) that fits with one’s self-knowledge (Dunning et al., 1989).

Some factors have already been shown to moderate children’s optimistic predictions in a way that is compatible with the motivated reasoning framework. For instance, children made less optimistic predictions about a task they were already very familiar with (a jumping task) than about a task they were less familiar with (a ball throwing task) (Schneider, 1998). With a familiar task, overly optimistic predictions should be more likely to conflict with children’s memory of their own performance in the task, which might explain why they are less overconfident. Similarly, if children have explicit beliefs about a given outcome, these explicit beliefs should moderate the extent to which they can engage in

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