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Cognitive Development



Children attribute mental lives to toys when they are emotionally attached to them



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ABSTRACT

Anthropomorphism of toys has been portrayed in popular culture with notable examples such as children's fairy stories, and, more recently, in movies like *Toy Story*. However, studies of children's attitudes toward inanimate objects suggest that they do not attribute mental states to toys. In two studies using a mental state induction technique, we demonstrate that children do exhibit this tendency with toys that are also their attachment objects. Attribution of mental states to objects was not simply due to familiarity, category membership, or perceptual similarity to sentient beings, but rather to emotional attachment combined with personifying features such as a face.

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1. Introduction

There were few dry eyes in the audience when Jessie, the toy cowgirl in the movie *Toy Story 2*, recounts the pain of being abandoned by her owner. Children's movies manipulate with astonishing ease our tendency to attribute mental lives to inanimate objects. Yet, a divide exists within developmental literature as to whether young children truly do think of toys as having mental states. [Piaget \(1930\)](#) described widespread animism in childhood on the basis of studies showing that young children attribute thoughts and feelings to inanimate entities. However, he did not distinguish between animism, which is the attribution of life to the lifeless, and anthropomorphism, which is the attribution

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of humanlike properties to nonhuman entities. Contrary to Piaget's (1930) assertion of anthropomorphism in childhood, subsequent work has suggested that preschoolers do *not* attribute mental lives to dolls (Gelman, Spelke, & Meck, 1983), and only rarely attribute sentience to toys even in imaginary play contexts (Hickling & Wellman, 2001).

Hall (2009) suggests that one source of confusion for young children may be toys such as dolls and teddy bears that often have faces, names, and personal histories in the same way as people. These toys are frequently treated as having mental states in imaginary games (Lillard, 2007; Taylor, 1999). However, Gelman et al. (1983) showed that children as young as 3 and 4 had no difficulty responding correctly to a series of questions about dolls, rocks, and humans when asked which had mental states and which were capable of action. Even when asked these questions in the context of reciprocal play, very few children attributed mental states to dolls and none attributed them to rocks. Hickling and Wellman (2001) analyzed conversations between children and parents and showed that 2–5-year-olds use psychological attributes to explain the behavior of living entities and physical attributes to explain the behavior of non-living entities, with very little confusion between the two. Furthermore, Massey and Gelman (1988) showed that children as young as 2 rarely attribute mental states to inanimate objects, including dolls, either in the context of imaginary play or under forced-choice experimental procedures. Therefore, in contrast to Piaget's (1930) claims, this recent research supports the contention that children do not anthropomorphize inanimate objects.

One possibility we examine is whether children attribute mental states specifically to toys to which they have become emotionally attached. Around 60–70% of young Western children exhibit emotional attachment to a stuffed toy or blanket (Litt, 1986); this tendency peaks at around age 3 (Passman, 1987). Such children rarely have more than one attachment object and frequently treat it as irreplaceable, such that they will refuse to swap their attachment object for a newer version (Lehman, Arnold, & Reeves, 1995) or even an identical copy (Hood & Bloom, 2008).

In the present study we explore whether 3-year-olds distinguish between their own toys by attributing mental states to their attachment objects but not to other favorite items from the same object category. To test this we used a forced-choice design with directed questioning to probe whether children attribute mental states to some items and not others (Gelman et al., 1983; Massey & Gelman, 1988), and we predicted that participants would state that attachment objects have mental states while their other toys do not. If so, this would suggest that attribution of mental lives to inanimate toys depends on whether or not the child is emotionally attached to item.

2. Experiments 1a and 1b

2.1. Experiment 1a

2.1.1. Method

2.1.1.1. *Participants.* Thirty 3-year-olds (15 boys; mean age 36 months, range 2–7 to 3–4) with attachment objects were recruited via the local health authority's birth records. Two additional children failed to complete the experiment and were excluded. The children were all native English speakers with normal vision. Most came from white, middle-class backgrounds. Parents who had indicated that their child had an attachment object (in answer to a routine set of questions asked during initial recruitment) were contacted by a follow-up screening call with a further set of criterion questions to assess suitability. These are detailed in Table 1. Our criterion for inclusion was that children used their object for self-soothing when going to sleep and that they had owned it for at least a third of their life. Of the parents contacted, approximately half had children whose attachment objects were toys, and the remainder typically reported that the attachment object was a blanket. Children were excluded if they had multiple attachment objects, did not use the object for sleeping, or did not get upset when it was mislaid. Twenty-three additional children (aged 2–10 to 3–5) were excluded because they did not meet all of these criteria.

2.1.1.2. *Materials and procedure.* Parents were asked to bring their child to our laboratory along with their attachment toy and the child's current favorite non-attachment toy—something they played with for at least an equivalent amount of time as the attachment object but that was not used for

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