Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Cognitive Development

Characterizing characters: How children make sense of realistic acting

Thalia R. Goldstein*, Paul Bloom

Yale University, New Haven, CT, United States

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Children and adults are presented with a special case of the unreal on a daily basis: realistic acting. Although the realistic portrayal of characters is a widespread activity, psychologists know little about how children understand acting, especially the differences between actors and the characters they play. In two studies we tested whether children believe that actors actually possess the physical and emotional states they enact. We found that 3- and 4-year-old children (but not 5-year-old children) fail to appreciate that what happens to a character on screen does not also happen to the actor in real life. We also found that, unlike adults, children tend to favor a nonrealistic portrayal over a realistic one when asked which better depicts a characteristic. These studies can provide a new lens on children's knowledge about portrayals of mental and emotional states in pretend worlds, as well as on their ability to quarantine the world of the unreal.

© 2014 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Realistic acting, in which individuals portray fictional characters and situations as realistically as possible, is everywhere—on television, in movies, and in the theatre. Children see actors portraying characteristics on a daily basis. These enacted portrayals pose a unique type of representational

---

* Corresponding author. Present address: Pace University, Department of Psychology, 41 Park Row, 13th Floor, New York, NY 10038, United States. Tel.: +1 212 346 1507; fax: +1 212 346 1618.
   E-mail addresses: tgoldstein@pace.edu (T.R. Goldstein), paul.bloom@yale.edu (P. Bloom).

challenge, since unlike other forms of pretense, the behaviors of actors often are created to be perceptually close to reality. In the studies reported here we explore children's understanding of such realistic acting.

Early researchers of children's understanding of fiction believed that young children could not tell the difference between what was real and what was pretend (Piaget, 1962; Piaget & Valsiner, 1930). However, more recent research suggests that children far younger than 4 can draw clear lines between truth and pretense (Estes, Wellman, & Woolley, 1989; Harris, 2000; Leslie, 1994; Wellman & Estes, 1986). Preschool children will not take a bite from a block they are pretending is a cookie, and are quick to correct adults who think that they should (Golomb & Kuersten, 1996). They know their best friend is real and Batman is not (Skolnick & Bloom, 2006). Even children with imaginary companions are adamant that these companions do not actually exist (Taylor, 1999).

But there has been little research addressing realistic acting: a special case of pretense pervasive in everyday life. Realistic acting seems to pose a problem even for adults, who often confuse a character's characteristics with those of the actor's. Although we know of no empirical research investigating why, when, or how adults confuse actors with their characters, there is a wealth of anecdotal evidence that such confusion exists. Adults write letters to actors who play doctors asking for medical advice (Gerbner & Gross, 1972), and ask scientific questions of Star Trek actors (Nimoy, 1975). An op-ed in The New York Times, written by an actress from the show *Breaking Bad*, discussed the fact that commentary about the show had moved from comments about hating her character to personal threats against the actress herself (Gunn, 2013).

In the present studies, we explore children's understanding of acting. We compare realistically acted characteristics to nonrealistic portrayals, based on the pretend play in which children engage daily. Beginning before age 2 and through the preschool years, children use physical and vocal cues to distinguish between when someone is pretending and when they are actually engaged in an action (Lillard et al., 2007; Lillard & Witherington, 2004; Ma & Lillard, 2006; Ma & Lillard, 2013; Richert & Lillard, 2004). These cues include more vocal variation or a higher pitch than typical speech, and more eye contact and exaggerated physical movements as compared to real actions. We hypothesize, therefore, that children will be able to easily tell that someone taking these cues to pretense even further, as nonrealistic actors do, does not actually experience the traits they portray, but that children may be confused by realistic actors, believing they actually experience what they portray.

In Study 1, we explore what children know about the distinctions between actors and the characteristics they portray. We predict that, like adults, children will be prone to confuse the characteristics of actor and character during realistic portrayals, more so than in nonrealistic portrayals. In Study 2, we investigate whether children distinguish at all between realistic acting and nonrealistic enactment by presenting the two types of portrayals side-by-side and asking children which one better depicts a given characteristic. We predict that as children develop they will be more likely (like adults) to choose a realistic portrayal as better depicting a characteristic.

We studied 3–5-year-olds because this is the age range within which pretense and role-play flourishes. Children of this age engage in extensive pretense (Harris, 2000), participate in collaborative role play (Harris, 1998; Singer & Singer, 1992), create imaginary companions (Taylor, 1999), more readily believe in magic than adults and older children (Phelps & Woolley, 1994; Woolley, 1997), and believe in the existence of a higher number and variety of fantastical beings than older children (Sharon & Woolley, 2004). Further, previous work has shown that despite having a general understanding of the factuality of different television genres (Huston et al., 1995), 5-, 7-, and even 11-year-olds still believe actors retain their portrayed jobs after the end of a television program (Dorr, 1983; Hawkins, 1977; Wright, Huston, Reitz, & Piemyat, 1994), suggesting that children's understanding of acting is still developing at this age. In both of our studies, we included an adult group for comparison.

2. Study 1

In Study 1, we contrast exposure to realistic acting (typically seen in movies and television) with nonrealistic acting (with cues based on the cues to pretense mentioned above). We contrast emotional and physical characteristics within each category. Adults may believe that emotional characteristics are more likely to transfer from character to actor. Intuitively, adults know that an actor playing a