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## Cognitive Development



# The Effect of Realistic Contexts on Ontological Judgments of Novel Entities



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### ABSTRACT

Although a great deal of research has focused on ontological judgments in preschoolers, very little has examined ontological judgments in older children. In the present study, 10-year-olds and adults ( $N = 94$ ) were asked to judge the reality status of known real, known imagined, and novel entities presented in simple and elaborate contexts and to explain their judgments. Although judgments were generally apt, participants were more likely to endorse imagined and novel entities when the entities were presented in elaborate contexts. When asked to explain their reasoning, participants at both ages cited firsthand experience for real entities and general knowledge for imagined entities. For novel entities, participants referred most to indirect experiences when entities were presented in simple contexts and to general knowledge when those entities were presented in elaborate contexts. These results suggest that contextual information continues to be an important influence on ontological judgments past the preschool years.

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## 1. Introduction

Creating ontological categories, or determining what entities exist and how these entities should be grouped, is a fundamental challenge faced by young children. Following their creation, these categories must be continually updated and maintained throughout the lifespan. One key ontological assessment that must be made whenever one encounters a piece of new information is whether it is factual or not. In order to maintain a correct representation of the real world, it is important to make these reality status judgments accurately. Young children were once thought to have difficulty making such decisions correctly because they were thought to be wholly credulous (Dawkins, 1995; Piaget, 1930). However, a wealth of more recent work shows that even young children are critical consumers of novel information (Harris, 2007). Woolley and Ghossainy (2013) have even argued that children are “naïve skeptics,” meaning their default ontological judgment is to deny the existence of unfamiliar entities.

It is well-established that even young preschoolers are largely adept at distinguishing reality from non-realities (Bourchier & Davis, 2002; Woolley & Wellman, 1993). The few errors they do reliably make are often in regards to entities with widespread cultural acceptance, like fantasy figures (Woolley, 1997). A considerable amount is also known concerning how young children make reality status judgments. Although they may privilege information gained through direct experience (Ma & Ganea, 2010; but see Jaswal, 2010), children must also accept information from others (Coady, 1992; Harris, 2012). For example, 4–8-year-olds claim that real, scientific, and endorsed entities (like cats, germs, and Santa Claus, respectively) do exist, but equivocal and impossible entities (like witches and flying pigs, respectively) do not (Harris, Pasquini, Duke, Asscher, & Pons, 2006). Children’s willingness to endorse the existence of some non-observable entities shows they do use indirect sources, like testimony provided by other people. In addition, they consider this testimony critically: Children weigh a variety of factors when determining whether to endorse a piece of novel information, including whether there are multiple types of evidence (Woolley, Boerger, & Markman, 2004) or group consensus (Corriveau & Harris, 2010), the past reliability and expertise of the source (Jaswal & Neely, 2006; Koenig & Harris, 2005), and the certainty with which information is conveyed (Jaswal & Malone, 2007).

Children also consider the context of novel information when judging reality status. Woolley and Van Reet (2006) exposed 4–6-year-olds to novel entities embedded in either everyday (e.g., “Grandmothers find sunrises in their gardens”), scientific (e.g., “Doctors use sunrises to make medicine”), or fantastical (e.g., “Dragons hide sunrises in their caves”) descriptions, and found that children endorsed entities more frequently when those entities were presented in scientific contexts as compared to everyday or fantastical contexts. Similarly, 5–7-year-olds judged novel characters as real more often when the characters were presented in a historical story as compared to a fictional story (Corriveau, Kim, Schwalen, & Harris, 2009). These studies suggest that if unfamiliar information is surrounded by realistic or credible detail, children may be more likely to believe it.

Determining the ontological status of novel information is not a task unique to the preschool or early elementary years. Older children are constantly being asked to accept novel information in school that they cannot directly experience. This is especially true in disciplines like history and science that require children simply to accept novel facts like that George Washington actually lived and that the world is composed of particles. Older children are also more able and more likely to encounter information on their own, from media or from peers, without adults to scaffold their decisions about what is true and what is not. However, most research investigating reality status judgments has focused on children younger than 8, so it is unclear how older children make these judgments and whether they do so in a manner similar to younger children. Given older children’s growing independence and their increasing reliance on indirect sources of information, it seems important to establish how this age group makes ontological decisions.

It may be that children are especially incredulous during middle childhood. Woolley and Ghossainy (2013) argue that children’s limited metacognitive abilities might increase their skepticism because the children are unaware of how incomplete their own knowledge is. Children may judge a novel entity as unreal because they have never heard of it before, whereas adults recognize how much they themselves do not know. It may also be that as children become aware that not all sources of

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