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# I've got a feeling: Urban and rural indigenous children's beliefs about early life mentality



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### ABSTRACT

This cross-cultural investigation explored children's reasoning about their mental capacities during the earliest period of human physical existence—the prenatal period. For comparison, children's reasoning about the observable period of infancy was also examined. A total of 283 5- to 12-year-olds from two distinct cultures (urban Ecuador and rural indigenous Shuar) participated. Across cultures, children distinguished the fetal period from infancy, attributing fewer capacities to fetuses. However, for both the infancy and fetal periods, children from both cultures privileged the functioning of emotions and desires over epistemic states (i.e., abilities for thought and memory). Children's justifications to questions about fetal mentality revealed that although epistemic states were generally regarded as requiring physical maturation to function, emotions and desires were seen as functioning as a de facto result of prenatal existence and in response to the prospect of future birth and being part of a social group. These results show that from early in development, children across cultures possess nuanced beliefs about the presence and functioning of mental capacities. Findings converge with recent results to suggest that there is an early arising bias to view emotions and desires as the essential inviolable core of human mentality. The current findings have implications for understanding the role that emerging cognitive biases play in shaping conceptions of human mentality across different cultures. They also speak to the cognitive foundations of moral beliefs about fetal rights.

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## Introduction

Psychological studies have illustrated that from very early on in development, humans possess remarkable cognitive abilities. For example, young infants can represent abstract categories such as “agent” and the number “2” (Baillargeon & Carey, 2012; Carey, 2009; Gopnik, Meltzoff, & Kuhl, 1999), and even fetuses can learn the prosodic features of their native language (Mampe, Friederici, Christophe, & Wermke, 2009) and remember their mother’s voice (De Casper & Fifer, 1980; Querleu, Renard, Versyp, Paris-Delrue, & Crèpin, 1988). These findings, although fascinating, are in many ways surprising given popular folk perceptions of what infants and especially fetuses are mentally capable of doing. Rather than viewing humans as able to think and remember during these early life stages, adults tend to deny infants and particularly fetuses with higher order cognitive abilities, instead only ascribing them with the mental capacities for basic emotions and desires (Gray, Gray, & Wegner, 2007). This distinction highlights that adults can and do treat certain human agents as possessing some aspects of mentality while lacking others (see also Bain, Park, Kwok, & Haslam, 2009; Haslam, 2006; Haslam, Bain, Douge, Lee, & Bastian, 2005; Haslam, Kashima, Loughnan, Shi, & Suitner, 2008; Loughnan & Haslam, 2007). Importantly, the types of mental capacities adults selectively ascribe to human fetuses have the potential to unconsciously shape the way in which they think and behave toward them (e.g., by biasing decisions on what to eat during pregnancy, whether to talk to fetuses in the womb, and whether to have an abortion). Indeed, research shows that perceptions about the kind of mind an agent has often guide judgments about moral standing and whether an agent is deemed worthy of moral consideration and care (Gray & Wegner, 2009, 2012; Gray, Young, & Waytz, 2012).

In the current investigation, we cross-culturally examined whether children, like adults, ascribe mental capacities to the human fetus by asking them about their own mental capacities during the prenatal period. We were particularly interested in which aspects of mentality children judge to be present from the earliest period of human physical development because ideas about enduring and inviolable characteristics underlie essentialist beliefs and are tightly connected to ideas about essential human natures (e.g., Gelman, Coley, & Gottfried, 1994; Gelman & Hirschfeld, 1999; Haslam, 2006; Rhodes, 2013; Solomon, 2002; see Gelman, 2003, for a review). Specifically, adults have been found to have two senses of humanness—an “essentially human” sense that comprises basic emotions and desires and a “uniquely human” sense that comprises higher order cognitive abilities (Haslam, 2006). Notably, adults treat only essentially human traits as early emerging and universal, which suggests that they are viewed as more central to concepts of humanness than uniquely human traits that are treated as more variable and acquired later in life (Haslam, 2006; see also Gray et al., 2007). Therefore, children’s inferences about the unobservable fetal period have the potential to shed light on their largely untutored intuitions about those abilities perceived to be the most fundamental, early arising, and stable aspects of persons’ minds (Emmons & Kelemen, 2014; Haslam, 2006; see also Gelman, 2003). To see whether mental state attributions would differ for an observable, and thus less abstract, period of human development than the in utero period, we also examined children’s beliefs about their mental life as infants.

Although adults assume that fetuses have some—but not all—mental abilities (Gray et al., 2007), why might we expect children to ascribe any mental states at all to an unobservable fetus? Research shows that infants and children readily perceive minds and engage in perspective taking when reasoning about other children and adults (Kovács, Téglás, & Endress, 2010; Onishi & Baillargeon, 2005; Wellman, Cross, & Watson, 2001). These early emerging abilities help to illustrate that mind perception is a core aspect of social reasoning and central to representations of persons (Baron-Cohen, 2000; Baron-Cohen, Tager-Flusberg, & Lombardo, 2013; Bloom, 2004; Emmons & Kelemen, 2014; Gray & Wegner, 2012). The centrality of mind perception in reasoning about people is further highlighted by findings from developmental research on intuitive afterlife beliefs. These show that from early on, children, like adults, have a bias to view mental states as the enduring aspects of persons, capable of functioning independently of a physical material body (Astuti &

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