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Did she mean to do it? Acquiring a folk theory of intentionality

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ABSTRACT

The ability to both identify and explain others' intentional acts is fundamental for successful social interaction. In two cross-sectional studies, we investigated 3- to 9-year-olds' ($n = 148$) understanding of the folk concept of intentionality, using three types of intentionality measures. The relationship between this type of reasoning and false belief and interpretive mind understanding was also examined. Judgment of the appropriateness of an explanation was based on adult responses ($n = 20$). Overall, the results indicated that the ability to both identify and appropriately explain a range of intentional acts does not fully emerge until 7 years of age or later. The pattern of explanations revealed the gradual development of a folk concept of intentionality. Preschool- and early school-age children focused on the protagonists' desires and actions, whereas 8- and 9-year-olds and adults were more likely to reference the protagonists' awareness and skills.

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Introduction

A clear understanding of the complex network of concepts that constitute a folk theory of intentionality is central to successful social functioning (Malle & Knobe, 1997). An understanding of another person's intentions is required to communicate effectively and interact appropriately (e.g., Dodge, 1980). If one girl hits another, the victim's reaction will depend on whether the act is viewed as intentional or unintentional; that is, did she mean to do it? We use this question to frame two studies on

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children's ability to both identify and explain intentional acts, with a focus on the transition from pre-school age to school age.

Following Malle and Knobe (1997), in this article we use the term *intention* in its everyday sense as a particular mental state or concept that is embedded in a broader folk theory of intentionality. The term *intentionality* is more typically applied to a sequence of actions carried out with a particular goal in mind (Malle, Moses, & Baldwin, 2001). Importantly, one can intend to do something (intention) without ever appropriately carrying out the associated actions (intentionality). In a series of studies, Malle and Knobe (1997) asked adults to explain a variety of intentional acts. After a working definition was provided to half of the participants, adults rated whether a variety of acts should be considered as intentional (e.g., “Anne is sweating,” “Anne is infatuated with Ben,” “Anne watered her new plants”). There was high agreement among adult participants regardless of whether they received the working definition. In another study, adults were asked the following question: “When you say that somebody performed an action intentionally, what does this mean?” Coding the responses revealed five components that Malle and Knobe described as constituting a folk concept of intentionality: “a desire for an outcome; beliefs about an action that leads to that outcome; an intention to perform the action; skill to perform the action; and awareness of fulfilling the intention while performing the action” (p. 111). For example, if a child kicked a pile of blocks, that action would be considered intentional if the child wanted the blocks knocked over (desire), believed that kicking the blocks would knock them over (belief), tried to kick the blocks (intention), had the ability to kick the blocks (skill), and was aware of kicking the blocks while doing it (awareness). In additional studies, Malle and Knobe manipulated the presence of these components in different scenarios and asked adults to rate the intentionality of the actions. The results suggested that there is a hierarchical arrangement to the folk concept of intentionality. First, desire and belief are required to form an intention. Then, given an intention to act, skill and awareness are also required for an action to be performed with intentionality (see Fig. 1).

Malle and Knobe's (1997) model is based on research with adults, but there has been little equivalent research with children. Past research has focused on the role of desires and beliefs in children's understanding of intention (Astington & Gopnik, 1991; Wellman, 1990), but awareness and skill have not been investigated. Nor have there been developmental studies of the relationship among these components. In the current studies, we use Malle and Knobe's model as a framework for examining how the understanding of more complex aspects of intentionality might emerge.

First, we review extant research on the development of an understanding of intention. In infancy research, the focus has been on whether infants recognize the special status of intention-in-action (Searle, 1983), more often called goal-directed action. What is clear from the research on this topic is that by 12 months of age, infants are skilled at responding to the behavioral concomitants of goal-directed action such as the self-generation of a protagonist's actions and the direction of a protagonist's gaze or limb movements (Tomasello, Carpenter, Call, Behne, & Moll, 2005). What is less clear is the extent to which infants understand the prior intention (Searle, 1983) in pursuit of a goal. Dunphy-Lelii and Wellman (2004) argued that 14- and 18-month-olds understand that looking is referential in the sense that it is directed toward a target, whereas preschoolers also grasp that looking elicits a visual experience. This suggests that although toddlers may possess a rudimentary understanding of intention, perhaps based on behavioral cues, they do not yet have anything approaching a mentalistic theory of intentionality (Malle & Knobe, 1997).

As stated earlier, one can intend to do something without carrying out the associated actions (Feinfield, Lee, Flavell, Green, & Flavell, 1999). To grasp this distinction, children should differentiate among prior intention, the mental representational component, and the goal-directed action (Bartsch

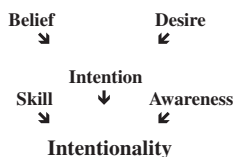


Fig. 1. A model of Malle and Knobe's (1997) folk concept of intentionality.

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