

Children's Concepts of Religious Rituals and the Role of Social Cognition and Ritual Familiarity

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Introduction

- Children and adults conceptualize religious rituals as a unique category of human actions¹.
- When a well-intentioned person performs a religious ritual incorrectly, 10-year-olds are more likely to claim the ritual will still be effective, whereas 5-year-olds are more likely to claim the ritual will no longer be effective².
- This developmental change is hypothesized to be due to children's developing social cognitive abilities³.
- Additionally, differences in children's concepts of religious rituals may be due to children's awareness of the ritual performer's intentions and to children's familiarity with the religious ritual⁴.
- The aim of the current study is to examine the relationship between children's concepts of religious rituals and their social cognitive abilities, familiarity with the ritual, and the intention of the ritual performer.

Methods

Participants.

- 50 Christian Children
- Gender: 46% Male, 54% Female
- Age: 5 to 10 years ($M = 7.02$, $SD = 1.672$)

Procedure.

- Children heard a story of either a **Baptism** or a **Novel Religious Ritual**.
- Answered if the ritual works if the wrong person performed it (**Non Emphasized Intention**) and if the wrong person performed it, despite meaning for the ritual to work (**Emphasized Intention**).
- Responses were *Yes-Really Sure* [+2], *Yes-Little Sure* [+1], *No-Little Sure* [-1], to *No-Really Sure* [-2].
- Completed 1st & 2nd order false-belief tasks as tests of social cognition (**0-Order**, **1st-Order**, **2nd-Order**).

Results

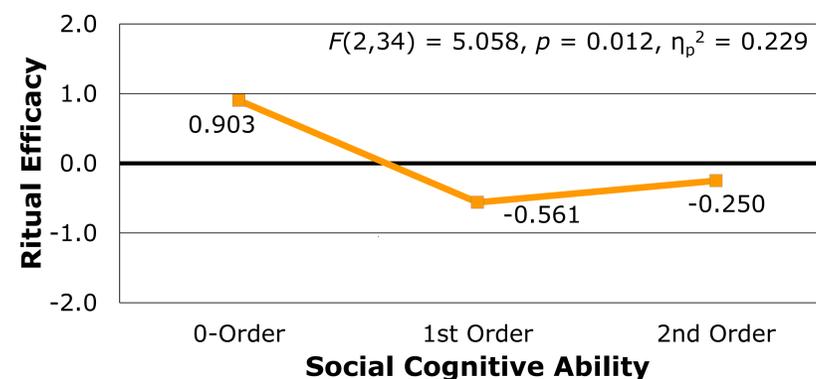
Analysis.

- 3-Way Repeated Measures ANOVA (Social Cognition x Emphasized Intention x Ritual Type).

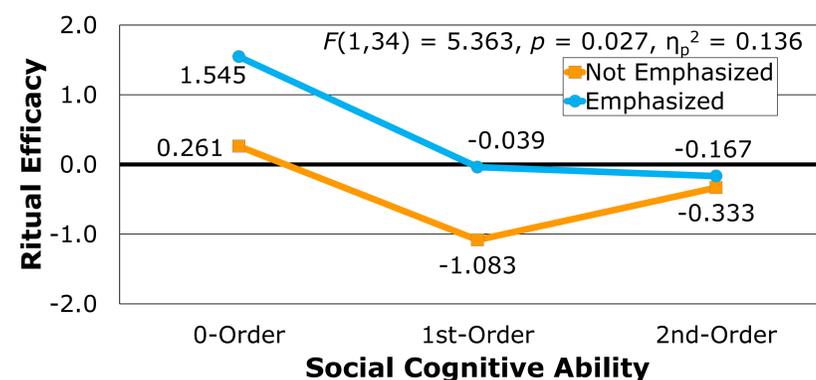
Results.

- There were three significant main effects and no significant interactions.

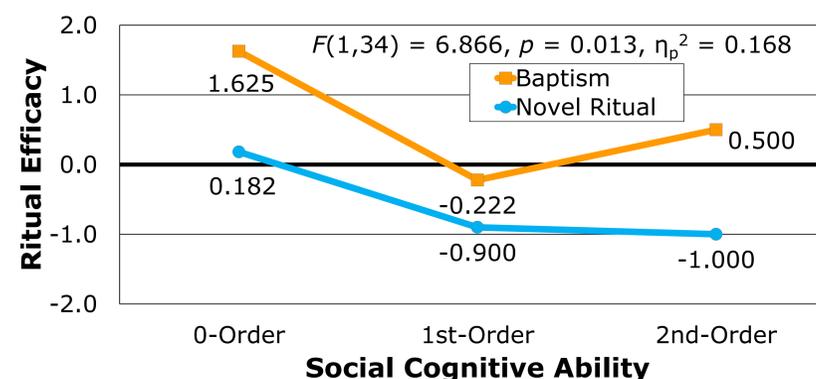
Higher Social Cognitive Ability related to Lower Ritual Efficacy



Emphasized Intention related to Higher Ritual Efficacy



Familiar Rituals related to Higher Ritual Efficacy



Summary of Results

- When children are unable to pass 1st-order false-belief tasks, they are more likely to say the ritual will work if the wrong person performs it. Children who pass 1st and 2nd-order false-belief tasks are less likely to say it will work.
- When intention is emphasized, children are more likely to say the ritual will work if the wrong person performs it. When it is not emphasized, they are less likely to say it will work.
- When the ritual is familiar to the child, children are more likely to say the ritual will work if the wrong person performs it. When the ritual is unfamiliar to the child, they are less likely to say it will work.

Discussion

- As social cognition develops, children utilize it more when thinking about religious rituals. Thus, children increasingly place importance on the ritual performer as a causal factor in the ritual's efficacy.
- Because social cognition is used to conceptualize religious rituals, children view the intention of the performer as having a positive causal effect on the ritual's efficacy.
- When children are familiar with a religious ritual, they have a better understanding of the causal effect that performers have on the ritual's efficacy.

References

- 1) McCauley, R. N., & Lawson, E. T. (2002). *Bringing ritual to mind: psychological foundations of cultural forms*. Cambridge University Press.
- 2) Richert, R. A. (2006). The ability to distinguish ritual actions in children. *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, 18(2), 144-165.
- 3) Barrett, J.L. (2004). *Why would anyone believe in God?*. AltaMira Press.
- 4) Richert, R. A. & Granqvist, P. (2013). Religious and spiritual development in childhood. In R. F. Paloutzian & C. L. Park (Eds.), *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*. (Chap 8). New York: Guilford.