

The Role of Social Cognition in Children's Understanding of Religious Rituals

Nicholas J Shaman & Rebekah A Richert, University of California, Riverside

Introduction

The ritual form hypothesis suggests religious rituals are understood through fundamental cognitive processes that are universal to all human beings¹. Tests of this hypothesis have focused on the intuitive nature of rituals, finding that individuals understand unfamiliar rituals in similar ways, given limited information about the ritual^{2,3}.

Empirical findings have suggested social cognition is one of the fundamental cognitive processes responsible for an individual's understanding of religious rituals. People judge a ritual actor's intentions as more important to the efficacy of a ritual than the ritual actor's correct physical actions². This is only true when the supernatural agent is omniscient and can read minds. When it is a non-omniscient supernatural agent, people judge the actions as more important. This suggests that social cognition is being used to think about the minds of the ritual actor and supernatural agent.

Developmental findings have suggested that children's understanding of rituals change over time³. Younger children are inflexible about the way any action should be performed. Old children are more flexible about regular, functional actions, but remain inflexible regarding ritual actions. Additionally, younger children maintain that rituals are unsuccessful if an intentional actor performs then incorrectly; older children are more flexible.

The aim of the current study is to determine how children's developing social cognitive abilities are related to their understanding of religious rituals.

Methods

Participants.

- 52 pre-school children
- Gender: 51.9% male, 48.1% female
- Age: 39 to 62 months old ($M=52.26$, $SD=6.16$)

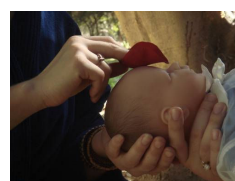
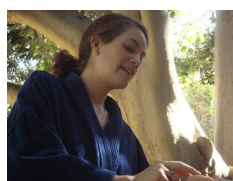
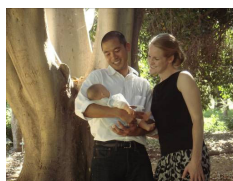
Procedure. Children were told a story about an unfamiliar religious ritual. They were asked if the ritual would still work if four mistakes were made: **(1)** normal person performed ritual; **(2)** special person drew a circle instead of a star; **(3)** special person used leaves instead of rose petals; **(4)** special person said the wrong words. Children did an unexpected contents false-belief task afterwards as well.

Analysis. Planned contrasts were used to test the standardized theory that a normal person would lead to an unsuccessful ritual, but drawing a circle would still lead to a successful ritual⁵.

Unfamiliar Religious Ritual



A fannalay is something special that Tinki people do. A fannalay usually happens in a forest, but can happen in other places as well. A fannalay usually happens to a baby, and the baby does not know she is being fannalized. Usually, when a baby is fannalized, a special person places rose petals on the baby's forehead. As the special person places the rose petals, she usually says, 'I fannalize you for Pallium.' Finally, the special person usually uses her finger to trace a star on the baby's forehead.



Results

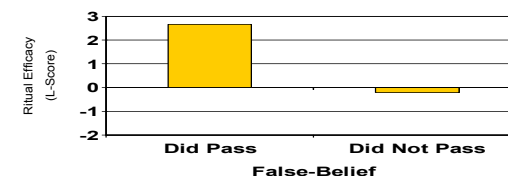
•Contrast Weights

- Ritual Agent [-3]
- Ritual Action[+1]
- Ritual Instrument [+1]
- Ritual Words [+1]

Ritual Efficacy	Raw Score	Contrast Weight	Weighted Score
Agent	1	-3	-3
Act	2	1	2
Instrument	2	1	2
Word	2	1	2
L-Score			3

• Participants who attributed false-belief to their friends were more likely to follow the standardized theory of responding for ritual efficacy variables than participants who did not attribute false-belief to their friends

• $t_{contrast}[31] = 1.731$, $p_{one-tailed} = 0.0465$, $r_{contrast} = 0.297$



Discussion

•Children with more developed social cognition place more emphasis on the ritual agent's contribution to ritual efficacy.

•As children's social cognition develops, they use it more to understand and think about religious rituals.

•Ritual understanding is not entirely based on religious learning, but on fundamental cognitive processes that develop across the life span.

References

1. McCauley, R. N., & Lawson, E. T. (2002). *Bringing ritual to mind: psychological foundations of cultural forms*. Cambridge University Press.
2. Barrett, J. L., & Lawson, E. T. (2001). Ritual intuitions: Cognitive contributions to judgments of ritual efficacy. *Journal of Cognition and Culture*, 1(2), 183–201.
3. Richert, R. A. (2006). The Ability to Distinguish Ritual Actions in Children. *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, 18(2), 144–165.
4. Barrett, J. L. (2002). Smart gods, dumb gods, and the role of social cognition in structuring ritual intuitions. *Journal of Cognition and Culture*, 2(3), 183–193.
5. Furr, R. M., & Rosenthal, R. (2003). Repeated-measures contrasts for "multiple-pattern" hypotheses. *Psychological methods*, 8(3), 275.