The Effects of Theory of Mind on Children’s Source Monitoring of Testimony

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Introduction

Children readily believe in entities that cannot be seen (e.g., Santa Claus); however, how much they endorse the existence of any entity varies by patterns of testimony they receive.1,2

But it is not always the case that children remember the source of knowledge for how they learn something.

- E.g., one study found that only 25% of 4- to 5-year-olds and 45% of 7- to 9-year-olds were able to correctly cite how they learned science, math, and history material.3

This lack of epistemological reasoning might be related to developing Theory of Mind (ToM) abilities.

Research Question:
1) Is there a similar frequency of source citation when asking children how they know about invisible entities that require testimony (e.g., God)?
2) Do children who pass ToM tests cite more sources of knowledge?

Participants

- Children 3.87- to 7.05-years from four religious affiliations (N = 103; Mage = 5.36, SDage = .72; 54.2% female):
  - Protestant Christian (n = 22)
  - Roman Catholic (n = 22)
  - Muslim (n = 39)
  - Religiously Non-Affiliated (n = 22)

Materials & Procedure

- Source Monitoring
  - Participants were asked how they knew if God possessed nine humanlike characteristics and if God was real or pretend.4
  - Open-ended responses were coded for citing sources of knowledge in the following categories:
    - Person
    - Family Member (Cohen’s Kappa = .784)
    - Other (Cohen’s Kappa = .635)
    - God (Cohen’s Kappa = .530)
    - Religious Text (Cohen’s Kappa = .721)
    - Other (Cohen’s Kappa = .719)
    - Self (Cohen’s Kappa = .655)
    - Don’t Know (Cohen’s Kappa = .842)
    - No Source (Cohen’s Kappa = .696)
- Theory of Mind (ToM)
  - Participants completed an Occluded Picture ToM task with a gender-matched agent:
    - Dichotomously scored as Pass (n = 50), Fail (n = 53)

Results

Summary of Results & Discussion

Research Question 1:
- Overall, the majority of children did not cite any source for how they knew about the attributes of an invisible agent (i.e., God).
- Children only cited any type of source 12.99% of the time – lower frequency than found in other research.3,4
- Children cited themselves as a source most frequently, so Theory of Mind might effect children’s ability to generate the source of information.
- Children who passed ToM cited themselves as the source of knowledge less frequently than children who failed ToM.

Research Question 2:
- Children who passed ToM tended to cite persons (family and non-family) as a source, whereas children who failed ToM tended to cite religion or other types of sources.

Discussion & Implications:
- When asked how they know something, 3- to 7-year-old children might judge the ability to describe a concept as more important than the ability to state the source of how they learned a concept.3,4
- Future research should continue to consider ToM’s role as a mechanism facilitating or constraining source monitoring – particularly for abstract concepts.

References


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