

Children's Understanding of False Beliefs That Result From Developmental Misconceptions

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Most studies of false belief have focused on beliefs about specific and arbitrary facts. The purpose of this research was to extend the study of false belief to false beliefs that result from the general misconceptions that characterize young children's understanding of the world. Three experiments, employing diverse methods, examined preschool children's ability to attribute false beliefs with respect to a variety of cognitive-developmental acquisitions: Level 2 perspective taking, appearance/reality, line of sight, and biological principles of growth and innate potential. Children showed some but incomplete mastery with respect to each of these new forms of false belief, and the level of performance was in most instances comparable to that found with standard measures. Despite this equivalence in overall difficulty, new and standard forms of false belief were not correlated in any of the three experiments.

An important component of a mature understanding of mental states is the knowledge that such states need not correspond to reality. Adults realize, for example, that it is possible to imagine or pretend something that is not true. Adults also realize that it is possible to believe something that is not true—that is, to hold a false belief. Much recent research indicates that

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young children do not at first share this understanding (Astington, 1993; Flavell & Miller, in press). It is only at about age 4 that children typically begin to succeed on tasks designed to assess an understanding of false belief. The knowledge tapped by such tasks has been referred to as the "litmus test" of the child's developing understanding of the mind (Wellman, 1988, p. 79).

To date, almost all studies of false belief have employed one of two basic paradigms. In the unexpected locations paradigm (e.g., Wimmer & Perner, 1983), the child hears a story in which an object is moved, without a story character's knowledge, from one location to another; the question is then where the character believes the object to be or where the character will search for it. In the unexpected contents paradigm (e.g., Gopnik & Astington, 1988), the child is shown a container that turns out to hold something other than its usual contents (e.g., a crayon box that holds candles); the question then is what someone else will think is in the container. The contents task can also be used to assess children's understanding of their own false beliefs (sometimes termed *representational change*); in this case, the question is directed to what the child initially thought was in the container, prior to seeing the actual contents.

The reasons for the popularity of these two paradigms are not hard to discern. In both, a clear basis for a false belief is established, and in both the child must overcome his or her own knowledge of the true state of affairs in order to infer this mistaken belief in another. In both, the sort of false belief created has a plausible relation to real-life, naturally occurring false beliefs—that is, being momentarily confused about the location or the identity of some object. Both sorts of tasks are easy to administer, are engaging to children, and lend themselves readily to numerous procedural variations. Finally, the findings from both paradigms have been remarkably consistent: Three-year-olds fail most versions of both tasks, and 4-year-olds succeed on most versions.

Despite these arguments in support of the standard approach, the thesis underlying the research presented here is that there has been an overreliance on a relatively few methods of conceptualizing and assessing children's understanding of false belief. If mastery of false belief is really the central conceptual achievement that many have claimed, then such mastery should be evident in other contexts than the limited range examined to date. Furthermore, the necessity of demonstrating (rather than simply assuming) the cross-context generality of emerging knowledge is shown by much recent research in cognitive development, the conclusion from which is that variability in performance is the rule rather than the exception when new skills are being mastered (e.g., Siegler, 1994). The need for such demonstration in the case of false belief is also suggested by an analysis of the types of beliefs at issue in the typical false belief study. In both the contents and

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