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Child language and parent discipline mediate the relation between family income and false belief understanding



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ABSTRACT

Achieving false belief understanding is an important cognitive milestone that allows children to understand that thoughts and reality can differ. Researchers have found that low-income children score significantly lower than middle-income children on false belief understanding but have not examined why this difference exists. We hypothesized that children's language and parent discipline mediate the income–false belief relation. Participants were 174 3- to 6-year-olds. False belief understanding was significantly correlated with family income, children's vocabulary, parents' self-reported discussion of children's behavior, discussion of emotions, and power assertion. Family income had a significant indirect effect on false belief understanding through children's vocabulary and parent discipline when examined independently, but only through children's vocabulary when using parallel multiple mediation. This study contributes to our knowledge of individual differences in false belief understanding.

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Introduction

Theory of mind refers to the understanding of mental states, such as desires, emotions, and beliefs, as well as the understanding of how these mental states motivate behavior. The hallmark test of

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theory of mind during the preschool years is the test for false belief understanding or the understanding that mistaken beliefs can guide our behavior (e.g., an actor will search for an object in a container that she *thinks* holds the object rather than where it truly is; Wellman, Cross, & Watson, 2001). Wellman and colleagues (2001) viewed false belief understanding as a “genuine conceptual change” given that most typically developing children achieve this understanding by the age of 5 years regardless of task manipulations. However, several researchers have also focused on the individual differences that predict false belief understanding during the preschool years (e.g., Hughes & Devine, 2015a). Children’s false belief understanding is significantly correlated with socioeconomic status (SES), as measured by family income, parents’ occupational status, parents’ education, or composite measures of these variables (e.g., Cole & Mitchell, 1998; Cutting & Dunn, 1999; Galende, de Miguel, & Arranz, 2011; Hughes, Deater-Deckard, & Cutting, 1999; Hughes, Dunn, & White, 1998; Pears & Moses, 2003; Ruffman, Slade, Devitt, & Crowe, 2006). These researchers have found that children from higher-SES families tend to have higher false belief understanding. In addition, when directly contrasting false belief understanding scores for low-SES and high-SES children, higher-SES children perform significantly better (Shatz, Diesendruck, Martinez-Beck, & Akar, 2003; Weimer & Guajardo, 2005).

Researchers have not yet directly examined why there are SES-related differences in false belief understanding, although researchers have suggested that this relation be explored (Holmes-Lonergan, 2003; Seidenfeld, Johnson, Cavadel, & Izard, 2014). In the current study, we hypothesized that child language and parent discipline mediate the relation between SES and false belief understanding. Researchers have shown that children’s own language skills and parents’ discipline predict false belief understanding (e.g., Milligan, Astington, & Dack, 2007; Ruffman, Perner, & Parkin, 1999), and there are SES-related differences in both child language and parent discipline (e.g., Dotterer, Iruka, & Pungello, 2012; Hart & Risley, 1995). Thus, child language and discipline are potential explanations for why there are SES-related differences in children’s false belief understanding. Below we review the research on parent discipline and children’s language skill in relation to children’s false belief understanding, as well as SES-based differences in the environments of young children regarding these two variables. We acknowledge that SES, our construct of interest, is multifaceted and can include measures of income, education, occupational status, or some combination of these. We refer to SES when discussing results of previous studies that used any of these assessments for conciseness. However, we examined family income specifically in the current study because our low-SES sample comprised children attending Head Start, whose enrollment is based primarily on family income.

Parent discipline and false belief understanding

Although the current study focused on a specific aspect of parenting—parent discipline—the relation between parent discipline and false belief understanding can also be understood by considering parenting style more broadly, which includes parent discipline as well as other parenting dimensions such as warmth. Thus, we distinguish between *parenting* or *parenting style* and *parent discipline* when discussing previous research depending on which construct was measured. Research on parenting style and false belief understanding has often focused on Baumrind’s (1967) classic categorization of authoritative and authoritarian parenting styles. On the one hand, researchers argue that the authoritative parenting style, which includes high warmth and a tendency for explanation and discussion when disciplining children, is facilitative of false belief understanding (e.g., Cole & Mitchell, 1998). On the other hand, researchers argue that the authoritarian parenting style, which includes less warmth and more punitive controlling measures such as physical discipline, should predict lower false belief understanding (e.g., Cole & Mitchell, 1998). In support of these arguments, Shahaiean, Nielsen, Peterson, and Slaughter (2014) found that mothers who reported a tendency to respond to disciplinary situations with general discussion and discussion of feelings had children with better false belief understanding. In addition, Farrant, Devine, Maybery, and Fletcher (2012) found that mothers’ tendency to encourage children to take the perspective of others during conflict was significantly related to children’s cognitive empathy (a composite of false belief understanding and other theory of mind tasks). Similarly, Ruffman and colleagues (1999) found that mothers’ self-reported discipline involving discussion of how others’ actions would make children feel significantly predicted children’s false belief understanding even after controlling for child age, verbal ability, SES, and number of siblings.

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