

Children's Emerging Understanding of Death

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ABSTRACT—*Children's understanding of death has been a topic of interest to researchers investigating the development of children's thinking and clinicians focusing on how children cope with the death of a loved one. Traditionally, researchers in cognitive development have studied death from a biological perspective. Current research suggests that exploring religious and spiritual conceptualizations might enrich our understanding of how children come to think about death. In this article, we review different methodological approaches that suggest that children form their understanding of death by engaging in conversations with and asking questions of family members, consuming cultural products, and participating in cultural rituals. We provide examples of how children combine different belief systems to form their understanding of death. We conclude by discussing recent research on how death-related socialization might be related to coping and bereavement after the death of a loved one.*

KEYWORDS—*understanding of death; explanatory coexistence; culture*

Exploring children's understanding of death has a long tradition in developmental psychology (Piaget, 1929). Traditionally, researchers believed that children could not understand the meaning of death until around age 10 years (Carey, 1985; Piaget, 1929). However, changes in how death is conceptualized

and related changes in methods have led researchers to conclude that children's understanding of death emerges earlier (Gutiérrez et al., 2019; Rosengren et al., 2014; Speece & Brent, 1984). In this article, we review research on children's understanding of death and examine how theoretical and methodological changes have led to a more nuanced view of children's thinking about death.

CONCEPTUALIZING DEATH

Traditionally, researchers considered death to be a unitary concept that was not understood by children until the ages of 9 or 10 (Piaget, 1929). Carey (1985) argued that children came to understand death only when they knew that it was caused by the breakdown of the bodily systems necessary to maintain life. More recently, in an effort to define death as a multifaceted concept, Speece and Brent (1992) proposed four subcomponents of death: universality (all living things die), finality (death is final and irreversible), nonfunctionality (death involves the cessation of biological and psychological processes), and causality (death can be caused by different factors). By conceptualizing death in terms of these subcomponents, researchers have concluded that children acquire an understanding of death at an earlier age (Speece & Brent, 1984, 1992). Prior to age 5, children begin to develop an understanding of universality, followed by an understanding of finality (Rosengren et al., 2014; Slaughter, 2005). By age 5, most children understand that death involves the cessation of bodily processes, and by age 6, children have the more sophisticated understanding that death can be caused by many factors, not just old age (Panagiotaki, Hopkins, Nobes, Ward, & Griffiths, 2018).

Although separating death into these subcomponents has been fruitful, it is limited in its treatment of death as a purely biological concept. This can be problematic because for many individuals and cultures, death is also understood through a religious or spiritual lens (Astuti, 2000; Gutiérrez et al., 2019; Watson-Jones, Busch, Harris, & Legare, 2017). To examine these nonbiological aspects, some researchers have proposed a fifth subcomponent of death, noncorporeal continuity, which focuses on beliefs in the afterlife (Bering & Bjorklund, 2004; Bering, Blasi,

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The research reported in this article was supported in part by the Institute of Education Sciences, US Department of Education, through Award #R305B150003 to the University of Wisconsin–Madison. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not represent views of the US Department of Education.

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& Bjorklund, 2005; Rosengren et al., 2014). Other researchers have acknowledged that cultures vary greatly with respect to the rituals and practices surrounding death (Kagawa-Singer, 1998; Lobar, Youngblut, & Brooten, 2006), and have studied how individuals growing up in different cultures come to understand death (Astuti, 2000; Busch, Watson-Jones, & Legare, 2017; Rosengren et al., 2014). An important finding resulting from these efforts is the idea that biological and religious concepts of death often coexist in the minds of both children and adults (Busch et al., 2017; Gutiérrez et al., 2019; Legare, Evans, Rosengren, & Harris, 2012).

HOW DO CHILDREN ACQUIRE THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF DEATH?

Researchers from the Piagetian perspective (1929) argued that children incorporated only biological information into their understanding of death. In contrast, we believe children form their understanding of death by combining their biological reasoning with information from their cultural environment, including information from religious and spiritual contexts. Using qualitative and quantitative methods allows researchers to examine how children make sense of the different information presented to them.

Biological Reasoning

According to the traditional view, children's understanding of death arises from a general understanding of biology. In one study, 3- to 5-year olds heard a lesson on the body and its systems, and then examined their understanding of death (Slaughter & Lyons, 2003). Children who learned about the body had a deeper understanding of the causes of death than children who did not. This and other research suggests that children's understanding of death is rooted in their understanding of life, the body, and other biological concepts (Rosengren et al., 2014; Slaughter & Lyons, 2003).

While biological reasoning is clearly important for an understanding of death, we argue that children's understanding of death emerges as the result of an interaction among their biological reasoning, their experiences with death-related rituals, and parental socialization. Thus, in coming to understand death, children make sense of a variety of biological and spiritual information. Examples of this concept can be seen in cross-cultural work, which has shown that children (and adults) often incorporate religious and spiritual beliefs into their understanding of death (Astuti & Harris, 2008; Gutiérrez et al., 2019; Watson-Jones et al., 2017). Thus, it is important to take a sociocultural approach that examines how children make sense of information that can appear to be in conflict (e.g., biological and religious views of death vary considerably when it comes to issues of finality). We argue that biological and religious information about death, often seen as being in conflict with each other, is frequently presented together in children's media and in

conversations with parents. This suggests that these different views are not presented as contradictory to children. Additionally, children are not simply absorbing this information, but rather asking questions and participating in cultural rituals that further their conceptual development (Rogoff, 1998).

The idea that children actively construct knowledge from available information implies that culture plays a central role in children's emerging understanding of death. Numerous studies have shown cultural differences in how children conceptualize death (Astuti & Harris, 2008; Bering & Bjorklund, 2004; Gutiérrez et al., 2019; Lane, Zhu, Evans, & Wellman, 2016; Panagiotaki, Nobes, Ashraf, & Aubby, 2015; Watson-Jones et al., 2017). Acknowledging these cultural variations raises the arguably more interesting question of *how* culture influences children's conceptualizations of death. Next, we draw from research on children's understanding of death and the broader cognitive developmental field to suggest three ways culture may influence children's understanding of this concept. We contend that differences in cultural norms related to how openly parents discuss death (Gutiérrez et al., 2019), the presence of death-related content in children's media (Lee, Kim, Choi, & Koo, 2014), and the extent to which children actively participate in cultural rituals surrounding death all influence children's understanding of death. Although evidence suggests that culture also influences how people think about the biological world (ojalehto, Medin, Horton, Garcia, & Kays, 2015), we are unaware of work connecting different types of conceptualizations of biology to children's reasoning about death.

Parental Conversations and Questions

One source of information about death that has received considerable attention is parent-child conversations. Although some aspects of death may be clearly observable (e.g., a dead animal cannot jump), others are less readily so (e.g., whether a spirit continues to exist). Children rely on testimony from adults to build their understanding of phenomena that are generally unobservable (Harris & Koenig, 2006). Testimony from adults may also influence children's endorsement of beliefs related to death and the afterlife (Lane & Harris, 2014), even though Western societies have attempted to shield children from death and death-related experiences (Ariès, 1974; Rosengren et al., 2014).

At first glance, this "modern interdiction of death" (Ariès, 1974, p. 12) might lead to the assumption that families rarely talk about death. However, the fact that parents in Western countries may not volunteer information about death does not mean that children do not request this information. Children's questions are likely central to their cognitive development (Chouinard, 2007). As children acquire more domain knowledge, their ability to ask questions improves and they ask more focused questions to fill specific knowledge gaps (Ronfard, Zambrana, Hermansen, & Kelemen, 2018). Many parents say that their children begin asking questions about death as young as age 3 (Renaud, Engarhos, Schleifer, & Talwar, 2015) and that

the questions are often sparked by a recent death in the family (Bridgewater, Menendez, & Rosengren, 2019), so asking questions might also be a way children learn about death.

Researchers examining children's understanding of death have examined the content of children's questions and how parents respond (Gutiérrez et al., 2019; Rosengren et al., 2014). The results of these studies are surprisingly consistent, suggesting that most of young children's questions are about the sub-components of death and are typically presented in very general terms ("What happens to people when they die?"), although children sometimes ask more specific questions ("How old are you when you die?"). Many of the questions focus on the causes of death. Given that causality is the last subcomponent children come to understand, they may ask questions about the sub-components they understand least in an attempt to enrich their knowledge. This work, although quite informative, has relied exclusively on parents' retrospective reports, making it difficult to relate children's questions to their understanding of death.

Researchers have identified an apparent mismatch between the content of children's questions and parents' responses. Most of children's questions are about the biological sub-components of death, but most of parents' responses include information about religion (Bridgewater et al., 2019; Gutiérrez et al., 2019). Also, children rarely ask specific questions about religious aspects of death, but parents' responses often include religious or spiritual elements (e.g., references to heaven). This might occur because children's questions can be interpreted quite broadly, allowing parents to provide responses from whichever belief systems they find most comforting. For example, if a child asks, "What happens to people when they die?" a parent could provide a biological response (e.g., "Your body stops working") or a religious response (e.g., "You go to heaven"). Parents might assume that children will be disturbed by biological responses because they suggest the end of a relationship with the deceased (rather than a continued spiritual relationship, as many religious explanations suggest), and they might also underestimate their children's ability to understand biological information (Bluebond-Langner, 1978; Gaab, Owens, & MacLeod, 2013). Some parents combine biological and spiritual information in the same answers or across many answers (Bridgewater et al., 2019). This suggests that children are exposed to numerous belief systems about death, and that at least some children may acquire a view of death that incorporates several belief systems at once.

Consumption of Media

Children also learn about death by observing how it is portrayed in the media. Researchers have examined how death is depicted in children's books (Lee et al., 2014) and animated films (Cox, Garrett, & Graham, 2005; Tenzek & Nickels, 2017). One study that examined how frequently death is portrayed in children's books looked at parents' reports of their children's favorite books as well as books that had won the Caldecott Medal (an award for distinguished picture books given by the Association for

Library Service to Children; Rosengren et al., 2014). Only 3% of these books depicted death. In contrast, in a study of animated children's films, 75% contained a death (Bridgewater et al., 2019), though many were not depicted explicitly (e.g., the death occurred off screen). The reason for this difference in the portrayal of death between children's books and children's films may be that depicting death implicitly is easier to do in films than in books. This concept seems to agree with findings that *books with images* portray death more often than *books without images*, even though books without images are generally intended to be read by older children (Poling & Hupp, 2008).

Researchers have also examined children's books designed for bereaved children. Although most of these books contain information about the biological sub-components of death, many also include religious and spiritual perspectives (Rosengren et al., 2014). Books, as cultural artifacts, depict a view of death that matches that of the culture of its writers. For example, books about death from Western European countries depict spiritual aspects of death more often than books from East Asian countries (Lee et al., 2014). This is in line with studies that show that children and adults in Western countries are more likely to think about spiritual aspects of death than children and adults in East Asian countries (Lane et al., 2016). Therefore, children likely receive culturally consistent information about death from their parents and the media, and that information may contain both biological and nonbiological perspectives on death.

Participation in Cultural Rituals

Recent studies have focused on the social functions of rituals, paying attention to their role in defining groups and facilitating group cohesion (Watson-Jones & Legare, 2016). Here, we focus on children's learning by observing and participating in cultural rituals (Rogoff, Mejía-Arauz, & Correa-Chávez, 2015). In an ethnographic study, children in Puebla, Mexico, often participated in and helped prepare for the *día de los muertos* (Day of the Dead) celebration (Gutiérrez, Rosengren, & Miller, 2015). During this celebration, families create *ofrendas* (altars) for dead relatives and place food there. Most children who participate in this celebration indicated that their dead relatives came to visit and that the dead ate the food placed on the *ofrendas*, even though the children understood that death is irreversible and that physical functions (like eating) stop after death (Gutiérrez et al., 2019). Other studies on children's understanding of death have used ethnographic field work to enrich quantitative approaches and improve our understanding of how children's experiences with death rituals helps shape their understanding of death (Astuti, 2000).

One conclusion to be drawn from these studies is that children form their emerging understanding of death by combining aspects of biological reasoning with concepts and symbols from religious and broader cultural contexts. Evidence suggests that children come to a biological understanding of death prior to integrating spiritual or religious dimensions, using their

biological understanding of death to constrain their religious understanding (Astuti & Harris, 2008; Giménez & Harris, 2005; Lane & Harris, 2014). Ultimately, people often combine these different models, resulting in the coexistence of different explanatory beliefs (Busch et al., 2017; Legare et al., 2012). These coexistence models can be target-dependent (where the belief system used depends on the context) or blended (where two or more belief systems are combined in one explanation). Examples of target-dependent models can be seen in research on how children's responses to questions about death differ depending on whether they are presented in a religious or a secular context (Astuti & Harris, 2008; Giménez & Harris, 2005; Lane et al., 2016). In one example of the blended model, a child stated that her deceased mother was in heaven (a spiritual understanding), but that her mother was tired because she had to stand on the clouds for a long time (imparting biological traits to spirits; Rosengren et al., 2014). These blended models can be difficult to identify, but some researchers have combined qualitative and quantitative approaches to examine how children merge different belief systems (Gutiérrez et al., 2019; Rosengren et al., 2014). Researchers should explore how and when children combine different beliefs.

RAMIFICATIONS OF CHILDREN'S UNDERSTANDING OF DEATH

Recent research suggests that different ways of understanding death influence how people respond to the topic. In research with children who were not experiencing bereavement, a greater biological understanding of death was related to lower anxiety about death (Slaughter & Griffiths, 2007) as well as to beliefs that people should feel sad after the death of a loved one (Gutiérrez et al., 2019). Clinical research focusing on bereaving children suggests that fear and anxiety may make it difficult for children to reason about death (Ellis, Dowrick, & Lloyd-Williams, 2013). Additionally, open communication between parents and children about death has positive consequences for children's coping abilities (Christ, 2000; Field, Tzadikario, Pel, & Ret, 2014). One study examined this issue retrospectively by asking adults to remember how open their parents were when discussing death with them and how much their parents shielded them from death (Martinčeková et al., 2018): People who recalled their parents being open to talking about death reported better coping after a death in childhood, which, in turn, was associated with better coping in adulthood. These data suggest that parent-child conversations about death are important for children's coping abilities and their understanding of death. This issue deserves further attention by researchers.

LOOKING AHEAD

The issues we have raised point to several directions for research. First, although researchers have examined children's

cognitive and affective understanding of death separately, few studies have explored these constructs together. Researchers should examine how children's cognitive and affective understanding relate and how religion influences both constructs. Second, while researchers have studied the death-related content of children's media, few studies have examined whether parents or children engage with this content. Although researchers report that children ask parents questions about death portrayed in movies (Bridgewater et al., 2019), we lack understanding about if and how parents use different forms of media as tools to teach children about death. Finally, few studies have looked at how losing a loved one influences children's understanding of death. This is a difficult issue to study prospectively, out of concern for the privacy of bereaved families. Research with bereaving children has focused almost exclusively on their coping skills, not on their understanding of death. Research with children who are not experiencing bereavement has often asked whether the children have experienced the death of a loved one, but few studies have examined whether understanding of death in children who have lost a loved one differs from understanding of death in children who have not lost a loved one (but see Panagiotaki et al., 2018).

CONCLUSIONS

By age 6, most children seem to have a fairly sophisticated understanding of death. They appear to actively construct their understanding of death by asking adults questions, consuming cultural products, and participating in cultural rituals. These sources often provide information that maps onto different belief systems, leading some children to combine these systems to create a concept of death that is deeply rooted in both their biological reasoning and their cultural symbolic system. Given this dynamic process of constructing knowledge, researchers should use a variety of methods to gain a comprehensive view of children's understanding of death and of how this understanding varies by context and culture. To understand children's conceptualizations of death, researchers need to explore in greater detail the relations among children's experiences with the death of a loved one, their affective responses to death, and how religious beliefs may shape their reasoning about this loss.

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