Beyond Theological Correctness: The Role of Others’ Knowledge in Children’s Developing God-Concepts

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By
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The author would like to give special acknowledgement and immense gratitude to her advisor, Joseph Cunningham, and second reader, Malcolm W. Watson, for all their advice, patience, encouragement, and wisdom over the past year. Special thanks also to members of the Cunningham Social Development Lab, Bruce Hood, and Paul L. Harris for their feedback on this project, and to her husband and parents for their love and support.
Adults have been shown to exhibit theological correctness – a tendency to explicitly entertain a description of supernatural agents (such as God) that is not actually used when representing or predicting the behavior of those agents – in their God-concepts (Barrett & Keil, 1996). This proposal aims to test the degree to which children use theological correctness; specifically, whether children’s applied concepts of God differ from their societies’ ideal concept, whether this is influenced by what the children think is God’s applied capacity, and how God’s perceived knowledge compares with the perceived knowledge of other agents in the children’s lives. To help answer these questions, children’s understanding of God’s intellectual capacity will be measured by asking them what they think God knows as compared to what other agents around them know about certain topics. Two groups of 24 children aged 4-5 and 7-8 (n = 48) will be asked who from among their parents, teacher, a doctor, and God ‘knows the most,’ ‘knows some,’ and ‘doesn’t know’ information about various actual and nonactual topics. A 2(Age) x 4(Agent) x 2 (Knowledge Type) ANOVA will be conducted to ascertain patterns of knowledge distribution across these 3 variables. It is hypothesized that the tendency to attribute more nonactual knowledge to God will increase with age. Other exploratory analyses are discussed.
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A *concept* is defined as a unit of mental representation roughly approximated by a set of properties associated with a defining label – e.g. animal, alive, heat, weight, number (Carey, 2000, 2004). The specific set of properties comprising a given concept is thought to change over a person’s life in the course of knowledge acquisition (Carey, 1991). One concept that has important social and cultural implications is that of God. God-concepts are typically developed within the framework of specific religions, which often work as forms of group identity (‘our’ religion is not ‘theirs’; Boyer & Walker, 2000) that may at times come into conflict with one another (the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, for a contemporary example). Political scientist Samuel Huntington (1993) wrote that of the many facets by which civilizations are differentiated – history, language, culture, tradition, and religion – religion is the most influential, and that the differences created by these facets – such as the relationships between God and man, parents and children, husband and wife, individual and group – are “the product of centuries” (Huntington, 1993, p. 25), transmitted from generation to generation. It is this transmission of religious thought and God-concepts from adult to child and their development thereafter proposed to be under investigation here. Religious thought being a uniquely human endeavor with considerable social implications, a better understanding of its beginnings in childhood may help us improve the understanding of adult manifestations of religious thought.
Specifically here, I wish to look at the potential use of theological correctness among children. Barrett & Keil (1996) referred to theological correctness as the tendency for people to explicitly entertain a certain description of supernatural agents (such as God) that is not actually used when representing or predicting the behavior of those agents. This implies that having a concept of God is more than just being able to explicitly articulate what or who God is; it is also what one implicitly thinks God is capable of. To what extent do children use theological correctness in expressing their God-concepts, and what is its influence on their God-concept formation? What this study endeavors to test is whether a child’s applied concept of God differs from their societies’ ideal concept, whether this is influenced by the child’s understanding of God’s applied capacities, and how God’s perceived knowledge compares with the perceived knowledge of other agents in the child’s life, namely: parents, teachers, and doctors.

To help answer these questions, I will measure children’s understanding by asking them what they think God knows as compared to what other agents around them know about certain topics. Knowledge is important to measure here because of how God is depicted in most contemporary monotheistic societies. Children throughout the world, if they are to become familiar with a God-concept, are most likely to learn of the omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent God of Abraham worshipped by the Judaic, Christian, Muslim, and Baha’i faiths: an immortal, intangible being that is everywhere at all times and knows all. This rather complex idea can be difficult for anyone to grasp fully, particularly young children, and many adults reconcile this difficulty by doing away with one or all of these attributes. It is with the help of their parents, society, and their own rapidly developing minds that children gain better understandings of the God-
concepts held in their respective societies. How and at what point do children come to understand that God’s proposed knowledge is not limited like humans’, how much do they think God actually knows, and does this affect the development of their God-concept?

Children (and adults) are largely dependent on information from others to learn about things they cannot verify firsthand, such as past events, historical figures, hypothetical futures, life on the ocean floor, the existence of germs… the list goes on. Thus, children’s sense of trust in others’ knowledge is crucial to how they come to understand the world around them. Children continuously have questions about their environment, and who they turn to in their seemingly endless quest for knowledge changes over time as they encounter new sources of knowledge, such as their parents, teachers, and domain experts (doctors, car mechanics, et cetera). They increasingly determine for themselves from whom they are going to seek and accept information.

Harris and his colleagues have completed a series of studies showing that information about a potential informant’s accuracy and/or the apparent knowledgeableness of an informant are very important to children’s determining from whom they are willing to trust new information (Clément, Koenig, & Harris, 2004; Harris, 2007; Koenig, Clément, & Harris, 2004; Koenig & Harris, 2005). The basic exercise used in these studies involves introducing children to a foreign object (for example, an unfamiliar tool), along with two people with differing opinions as to what the object is called – e.g., dax or wug. In one version of this research, the children are first shown a familiar object (a ball) and the two informants have differing opinions as to what it is called – ball or shoe. The children know that one of them is wrong, and when
later asked whether the foreign object is a dax or a wug, they more often trust the answer given by the individual who knew the ball was a ball (Koenig & Harris, 2005). In a similar method, children are again presented with a familiar object and two informants, but in this case one of the informants is not wrong, she simply does not know what the object is, and this unknowledgeable person is less likely to be trusted later on when it comes to naming the dax/wug (Koenig & Harris, 2005).

The degree to which children recognize who they ought to trust changes with age. Three-year-olds do not consistently recognize that the inaccurate person is not to be trusted, while four-year-olds become more predictable in doing so (Koenig & Harris, 2005). This may be because three-year-olds generally have not yet mastered the concept of false beliefs, so the idea that anyone could possibly believe a ball is a shoe may just be confusing; perhaps this person is playing a game or being silly. While false belief may not always be clear to a young child, ignorance certainly is. Children as young as three years of age are more sensitive to ignorance than to inaccuracy and they can reliably attribute ignorance but not false belief to others. It may be understood then, that accuracy and especially knowledgeableness are very important to a child when it comes to trusting others’ information starting at a very young age.

Typically the first informants children have contact with are their parents, with whom their relationships evolve over time. These relational changes, along with children’s gender and their understanding of others’ minds, have been found to have an impact on children’s God-concepts. I will review these topics briefly before returning to theological correctness.
Parents. The parent-child relationship has long been assumed to have considerable influence on children’s religious development. As far back as 1926, medical doctor and author Frank Howard Richardson (1926) wrote that the only way for a child to conceive of a loving God is in terms of a loving parent, and that parents should thus strive to be so like the God they worship that their will children find no difficulty in transferring their adoration and devotion from the human model (their parents) to the divine original (God). In other words: be the God you wish your children to believe in. While Dr. Richardson’s opinion here puts a massive amount of pressure on parents, his ideas do not stray too far off from what more contemporary empirical studies have found. Evidence suggests that the parent-child relationship does model children’s God-concepts, and a child’s religious development is thought in part to be a transfer of attachment from the parent/s to a “perfect substitute” attachment figure: God (Eshleman, Dickie, Merasco, Shepard, & Johnson, 1999). Piaget, however, understood children’s God-concepts in less Freudian terms and as more crudely anthropomorphic, with children applying their cognitive representations and understanding of their parents to a concept far too abstract for their young faculties to grasp until they begin to move beyond the concrete-operational stage of thinking (Piaget, 1969).

Parents’ personal beliefs, involvement with the child, and overall parenting style influence whether a child is likely to believe in God (Shtulman, 2008), how they perceive God’s proximity (Eshleman et al., 1999), and how they perceive God’s image, respectively (Hertel & Donahue, 1995). Shtulman (2008) showed that children are more likely to believe that a religious being is real if their parents do so as well. Interpersonal attributes which children perceive in their parents – such as nurturing, powerful,
authoritarian, or benevolent – tend to later also be attributed to God (Nelsen & Kroliczak, 1984; Hertel & Donahue, 1995; Dickie, Eshleman, Merasco, & Shepard, 1997), and children with negative images of their parents likewise tend to have negative images of God (Dickie et al., 1997). Eshleman et al. (1999) showed that older children and children whose parents are less involved in their lives perceive God as closer. This has been thought to be due to children’s awareness of a growing distance between them and their parents as they grow older (Heller, 1986), and parents’ increased emotional distance may lead a child to perceive God as closer (Kirkpatrick and Shaver, 1990), showing an inverse rather than direct relationship between the parent-child and God-child axes.

As children grow older and begin perceiving their parents as more distant, especially during middle childhood, they rely less on direct contact with parents (Eshleman et al., 1999). Other changes during this time of a child’s life involve school, where children are presented with teachers as potential secondary attachment figures. There is evidence that suggests the teacher-child relationship is important for children's cognitive and socioemotional competence in school (Howes, Hamilton, and Matheson 1994; Pianta 1997), and de Roos, Miedema, & Iedema (2001) showed that harmony and closeness in the teacher-child relationship can predict a loving God-concept. It is apparent then, that when studying children’s religious development one ought to investigate the teacher-child relationship as well as the parent-child relationship.

**Gender.** Gender plays a role here as well. Same-gender parent’s nurturance is most predictive of a child’s perceiving God as nurturing (Dickie et al., 1997). Boys tend to see God as more paternal while girls tend to see God as more androgynous – both
paternal and maternal, (Dickie et al., 1997), and when boys and girls perceive God as same-gender they perceive God as closer (Eshleman et al., 1999), though in general girls perceive God as closer than boys (Heller, 1986; Eshleman et al., 1999). This may be because there is a focus on separation from the (usually female) primary care-giver in boys' psychological development while girls’ attachment to the primary care-giver is encouraged (Eshleman et al., 1999), however this theory stands in contradiction with the idea that parental distance predicts a nearer perception of God. Children of both genders begin to see God as more androgynous during early to middle childhood (Eshleman et al., 1999).

*Theory of mind.* Changes in perception of God seem to occur during early to middle childhood, around the time when children begin to develop a more sophisticated theory of mind; that is, they begin to better understand others’ minds as separate from their own and separate from one another. They start to understand that people can harbor false beliefs and that background knowledge is necessary for others to understand novel ideas. They also begin to discriminate among different types of minds (e.g. parents, pets, friends, supernatural beings). At the same time that they are mastering an understanding of the physical and biological laws of the world and the objects and beings in it, they also learn about supernatural beings – such as God – for whom these laws do not apply. How is this reconciled in a child’s mind?

There are two competing theories as to how theory of mind and agent concepts develop: *theory theory*, and *simulation theory* (Barrett, Richert, & Driesenga, 2001). Simulation theory holds that children basically put themselves in another’s shoes and imagine or run a mental simulation of what they would do in that person’s situation.
According to theory theory, children make theoretical conclusions based on what they have seen evident before them, developing sets of rules and applying them to appropriate beings at appropriate times, adjusting these rules as mandated by new evidence or information.

Common methods of determining whether children have developed a theory of mind include unexpected contents and occluded figures false-beliefs tasks (Giménez-Dasi, Guerrero, & Harris, 2005; Barrett, Newman, & Richert, 2003). In these tasks, children are asked whether other people would know, for example, that a box of Smarties in fact contains pencils or that a partially occluded picture shows a rendering of an animal, prior to opening the box or removing the occlusions and after the children themselves have seen the contents of the box or the complete picture. Three-year-olds do not consistently pass these tests. Most three and some four-year-olds, when provided secret information regarding the contents of a box, the full image of a picture, or the rules of a game, frequently assume that both God and their friends or mothers would also be privy to this knowledge. By the age of five or six, children consistently distinguish between human knowledge and God’s knowledge successfully.

While children have been shown to anthropomorphize God and other religious beings much more than adults do (Shtulman, 2008), the above studies (and others: e.g. Barrett, Richert, & Driesenga, 2001) show that children may actually assume minds to be more “God-like” than human-like, and once they understand that people can have false beliefs or that they need background knowledge to understand novel artifacts and ideas, they do not attribute these fallibilities and limitations to God, as one would suppose if children did indeed first form a representation of human minds then map this
representation onto other minds (Barrett, Richert, & Driesenga, 2001). Instead, it becomes understood that God’s knowledge is different from that of mortal humans’, which lends support for the theory theory of agent concepts over simulation theory. Children eventually see for themselves that human knowledge is limited but may learn from the adults around them that God is omniscient, and if they find this information trustworthy they apply these rules in appropriate situations.

What do false-beliefs tasks tell us then, about children’s developing God-concepts? That between the ages of three and six, children acquire an increasingly sophisticated apprehension of their respective culture’s concept of God. But there is more to a God-concept than simply being able to affirm what God, as opposed to humans, theoretically should be able to know in certain situations according to societal standards. In their study, Barrett & Keil’s (2006) adult sample exhibited theological correctness when recalling stories involving God, wherein they incorrectly recalled that God tended to one problem and then another or could not perceive of some event due to an obstacle, which ran against their previous declarations of God’s omnipotence and omniscience. One might suppose that while children are simultaneously learning how biological, physical, and mental worlds work alongside the idea that these workings do not necessarily apply to God, that at some point they may also begin displaying theological correctness.

To my knowledge, studies have not addressed children’s perception of precisely what agents may know as a facilitator of their concept-development. When addressed, it is done so in this theory of mind context. That is, studies have addressed children’s reasoning about other agents’ theoretical knowledge rather than children’s beliefs about
agents’ more specific knowledge of how the world works – looking at agents as passively having knowledge abilities rather than acting as sources of distributable knowledge. This distinction is relevant, seeing as children are actively in the pursuit of knowledge. Children are full of questions about the world around them, and they rely on others to provide them with information about things they cannot see for themselves. When seeking knowledge, children trust accurate, knowledgeable informants, and over the course of their lives they encounter several informants from which to choose, such as their parents, teachers, experts, and friends. Their understanding of other minds – human and nonhuman – begins to shift starting around the age of three, and while encountering these new agents their relationships with their parents, teachers, and possibly God are also changing considerably. It stands to reason that the degree to which various agents are deemed knowledgeable about the world influences the trustworthiness of that agent’s information, which would in turn influence a child’s relationship with that agent. I propose that this is part of children’s religious development.

The study I would like to propose would use children’s perception of an agent as a valid source of knowledge to investigate the pattern of change in children’s perception of others’ knowledge at different stages of the early school years, how this influences specifically their perception of God’s knowledge, and likewise their God-concept. As far as I know, this would be the first study of the sort.

Proposed Methodology

Children will be asked about the knowledge capacity of four agents: God, their parents, their teacher, and a doctor. The reasons for asking about God and children’s parents and teachers should be clear. Doctors are easily recognized by children (Lutz &
Keil, 2002) and are known as being deeply intelligent on certain matters of health and how the mind and body work, and have the ability to make sick and even dying people healthy again. This may bring children to regard doctors as important authorities and children may believe that doctors know a great deal about many things regarding the world, even outside their craft. A doctor also represents a relatively unfamiliar agent whereas parents and teachers are very familiar and know the child intimately. A doctor may therefore act as a human control to help determine when or whether familiarity or perceived knowledge may trump the other.

Participants

Two groups of 24 children aged 4-5 and 7-8 (n = 48) will be recruited from area preschools and elementary schools. The sample will be open to any denomination since there is no reason yet to expect denominational differences. Denominational demographic data will be collected, however, to be controlled for if necessary and may be taken into consideration in later manifestations of the study if such a direction shows potential to be fruitful. For now religious denomination will simply be noted.

Materials

Parent and teacher questionnaires. When obtaining informed consent from parents and teachers [see Appendices A and B] to allow the children to participate in the study, respondents will also be invited to complete a brief questionnaire [see Appendices C and D]. Parents will be asked about their professions (if either parent is a doctor, teacher, or member of the clergy this should be taken into consideration), level of education, household composition (e.g. single or two parent home), and belief in God. Teachers will only be asked about their belief in God. These demographics will be used
as controls and to test possible effects of parental and teacher belief in God on children’s God-concepts.

*Agent cards.* To help the children keep track of which agents they are being asked about at a given time, they will have agent cards available to look at. Each card will contain an image depicting a stick figure of the agent in question – parents, teacher, doctor, or God [see Appendix E]. Considering various possible household compositions, there will be a group of parent cards from which the children may choose which one is representative of their parent/s. There will also be two teacher cards – one male, one female – and the children may choose which one represents their teacher. The doctor agent card will show an androgynous individual wearing a lab coat and stethoscope. The agent card for God will just show an attractive letter ‘G’ to avoid complications for children who either do not or are not permitted to consider anthropomorphic depictions of God.

*Questions.* Harris (2000) broke children’s questions down to two categories: questions about the actual and nonactual world. The actual world refers to the here-and-now, things that children can see for themselves but do not understand, such as why some things float in water and others sink. The nonactual world refers to things in the past or hypothetical future (historical figures, what would happen if…), things children cannot see (the air they breathe, the germs that make them sick), and metaphysical questions (why don’t angels fall down, where are people before they are born). The children in this study will be asked 10 questions based on these two categories, each category comprising 5 questions [see Appendix H].

*Procedure*
After obtaining verbal assent from the children [see Appendix G], they will first be asked if they know what their parents do for work (to see if the children are aware of either parent being a teacher, doctor, or member of the clergy), if they know what God is, and whether or not they think God is real or pretend. Once this information is noted, they will be asked to help the experimenter learn what they think other people know about various topics. The agent cards will be shown and explained to them, and each child will be asked to assign each agent card to the appropriate category of knowledge for each question. After the experimenter reads each question to the child, the child will be given each agent in a counterbalanced presentation order and asked to place each agent card into one of three stacks representing categories of amount known [see Appendix F]: “Knows most” (a completely filled in circle), “Knows some” (a partially-filled circle), and “Doesn’t know” (an empty circle) The experimenter will then generate a “knowledge score” which will be used as the dependent measure by recording the point value for each agent which corresponds to the assigned category of knowledge for each question (i.e., 3 points for placement in “knows most,” 2 points for placement in “knows some,” 1 point for placement in “doesn’t know”). Points will then be summed for each agent within each of the two question groups [see Appendix H].

Proposed Data Analysis and Expected Results

Knowledge scores will be analyzed in a 2(Age) x 4(Agent) x 2 (Knowledge Type) ANOVA, with repeated measures on the latter two factors. Additional analyses may be pursued to explore possible effects of child gender and child, parent, and teacher belief in God. Other exploratory correlations and comparisons may be pursued, such as correlations between parents’ or teacher’s belief in God and children’s belief in God or
attribution of knowledge to God, and correlations between children’s belief in God with attribution of knowledge to God

The main hypothesis is that the older children (7-8) will more consistently attribute nonactual knowledge to God than to other agents than will younger children (4-5) who may still be reconciling their God-concepts with worldly concepts and thus do not yet articulate a theologically correct concept of God. Based on the gender literature reviewed above, it is also hypothesized that there may be gender differences, though precisely what differences may manifest in this knowledge distribution is not easily inferred from the literature.

Limitations and Future Directions

An obvious limitation of this study is the perceived availability of the various agents, namely God, as compared with the other three. My intention is to convey to the children that I wish them to answer who they think knows the most about a topic, but it is possible that a child may not be able to mentally move past the fact that whoever may know the most, they are more likely to get an answer from their parents, teacher, or a doctor when actually posing the question. While they may think God truly knows more in practice (the theologically correct answer), if they were actively interested in knowing more about a topic they may sooner turn to, for example, their teacher, and therefore attribute this knowledge to their teacher rather than to God in the study. Adults’ understanding of how to ask God about something is to pray, and Woolley (2000) cites studies showing that children’s understanding of prayer shifts between the ages of four and five from a conception of prayer as physical activity associated with an event (i.e. before meal, bedtime, church, etc.) to a mental activity – an interaction between God and
thoughts. If children limit their attributions of knowledge to who they feel is available for inquiry about a topic – that is, if they do not think they can ask God questions through prayer even though they think God may know the answers, and therefore consider God a non-applicable agent in their case – this may mistakenly skew our data away from knowledge attribution to God.

Close analysis of the doctor agent may potentially provide a remedy for this, or at least guide future research. If the doctor is presented as a doctor, not their doctor, then this is a hypothetical individual whom the children do not know and do not have access to, but who should know a lot about some of the topics at hand. Even though a child cannot directly pose a question to this individual, if s/he correctly determines that the doctor is indeed knowledgeable about the topic, this may demonstrate that the child is able to differentiate between knowledge and availability.

Future studies may want to more directly investigate parent-child and teacher-child dynamics by taking measure of attachment styles along with to whom more knowledge is attributed. Doing so here would further complicate an already rather complicated study. Future studies may also want to consider adding the Internet as a knowledgeable agent. Even if younger children are not yet allowed to use the Internet themselves, they likely know of it, and know it to be something that older kids and grown ups turn to as a source of knowledge. This may lead some children to think the Internet is itself an actively knowledgeable agent rather than just a tool, and may even perhaps be perceived as more knowledgeable than other agents.
Notes

1. This was determined using a spatial task, wherein children sat at a table and moved a self-chosen felt-cloth figure representing God nearer to or farther from their person depending on where they felt God was on two scales – near or far away, and up in the sky or near to them on earth – during given situations, e.g. falling off a bike, being hurt by another child, etc.

2. This is especially pertinent with regards to Christian religious development, as adults often define their spiritual beliefs in terms of having a personal and reciprocal “relationship” with God and/or Jesus Christ (Azari, 2005). Cross-religious studies should be done to determine whether this particular understanding of a relationship with God is important in other religions as well, or if a personal relationship with the divine is particular to certain denominations of Christianity.
References


Richardson, F. (1926). The most inspiring task ever assigned--Religious instruction in the light of the newer knowledge of psychology. *Parenthood and the newer psychology: Being the application of old principles in a new guise to the problems of parents with their children* (pp. 178-191).


Dear parent/s,

I am a Masters candidate in Psychology from Brandeis University, and I am conducting research about religious development in children.

Children are very much dependent on the adults around them for knowledge about things they cannot see for themselves: past events, future events, ‘invisible’ natural entities such as germs or oxygen, and supernatural entities such as God or angels. The people children trust the most in order to learn things are people whom they deem knowledgeable. School is a very important and exciting time for children because they are meeting new people – teachers, friends, experts like doctors or car mechanics; all of whom know different things – and developing relationships with these people. They may also be learning about God, either from you or perhaps through friends or other media.

I would like to investigate what children think other people know and how this affects the way they attribute certain kinds of knowledge to those around them. In the context of a game-like task, I will present the children with four knowledge agent characters – their parent/s, teacher, a doctor, and God – and ask them who they think knows the most, some, or nothing about various topics, such as what they dream about, why people have different colored eyes, why some things float in water and others sink, or where angels live. I know religion is a sensitive topic, so children would not be given any information, they will simply be asked about what they already know and what they think others know, and they’ll be told that it’s okay if they themselves don’t know about a topic.

The activity would be presented like a sorting game that they would enjoy and incorporated in a natural manner into the daily classroom routine to the teacher’s specifications so as to not disrupt the class. In the end the children will get a set of stickers as a thank you gift for helping out.

Some information from the children’s parents and teachers would also be helpful. If you would like your child to participate in this study, please date and sign the bottom of this form, and if you would like to provide some information as well please complete the questionnaire attached. Any information you, your child, or the child’s teacher provides will remain completely confidential. Should you and your child choose to participate but then later change your minds, that is okay. In that case, your and your child’s information will be removed from the study and deleted from any record. If you have any questions or concerns please feel free to contact me, and thank you very much for considering our request.

Best regards,

Sara J. Bersche, MA
Masters degree candidate for Psychology
Brandeis University
saraj@brandeis.edu
(610) 392-1985
Appendix B
Teacher consent form

Dear teacher,
I am a Masters candidate in Psychology from Brandeis University, and I am conducting research about religious development in children.

Children are very much dependent on the adults around them for knowledge about things they cannot see for themselves: past events, future events, ‘invisible’ natural entities such as germs or oxygen, and supernatural entities such as God or angels. The people children trust the most in order to learn things are people whom they deem knowledgeable. School is a very important and exciting time for children because they are meeting new people – teachers, friends, experts like doctors or car mechanics; all of whom know different things – and developing relationships with these people. They may also be learning about God, either from their parents or perhaps through friends or other media.

I would like to investigate what children think other people know and how this affects the way they attribute certain kinds of knowledge to those around them. In the context of a game-like task, I will present the children with four knowledge agent characters – their parent/s, teacher, a doctor, and God – and ask them who they think knows the most, some, or nothing about various topics, such as what they dream about, why people have different colored eyes, why some things float in water and others sink, or where angels live. I know religion is a sensitive topic, so children would not be given any information, they will simply be asked about what they already know and what they think others know, and they’ll be told that it’s okay if they themselves don’t know about a topic.

After obtaining consent from the children and their parents, the activity would be presented like a sorting game that they would enjoy and this could be incorporated in a natural manner into the daily classroom routine to your specifications so as to not disrupt the class. In the end the children will get a set of stickers as a thank you gift for helping out.

Some information from the children’s parents and teachers would also be helpful. If you would like to participate in this study, please date and sign the bottom of this form and complete the questionnaire attached. Any information you, the children, or their parents provide will remain completely confidential. Should you choose to participate but then later change your mind, that is okay. In that case, your information will be removed from the study and deleted from any record. If you have any questions or concerns please feel free to contact me, and thank you very much for considering our request.

Best regards,

Sara J. Bersche, MA
Masters degree candidate for Psychology
Brandeis University
saraj@brandeis.edu
(610) 392-1985
Appendix C
Parent Questionnaire

You are under no obligation to fill out the entire form, if at all. Any information you choose to provide will be helpful to the study and will remain completely confidential. The code in the upper right corner is only to connect this form with your child for analysis purposes and will never be used to identify you or your child personally in any way. Thank you.

1. You are the child’s mother father other guardian

2. Who else lives in the house with you and your child?

3. What is your highest level of education?
   - High school diploma or equivalent
   - Associates degree
   - Bachelors degree
   - Masters degree
   - PhD
   - Post-Doc

4. Are you a teacher, doctor, or clergy? No.

5. Is anyone else in your household a teacher, doctor, or clergy? No.

6. Do you believe in God? Yes No Don’t know

7. Does your spouse believe in God? Yes No Doesn’t know Not applicable (NA)

8. With what religion, if any, do you affiliate? ________________ None

9. With what religion, if any, does your spouse affiliate? ________________ None NA

10. Do you or your spouse ever talk with your child about God? Yes No
Appendix D
Teacher Questionnaire

You are under no obligation to fill out the entire form, if at all. Any information you choose to provide will be helpful to the study and will remain completely confidential. The code in the upper right corner is only to connect this form with your student for analysis purposes and will never be used to identify you or your student personally in any way. Thank you.

1. Do you believe in God?   Yes   No   Don’t know

2. With what religion, if any, do you affiliate? _______________________  None

3. Have any of your students asked you questions about God?   Yes   No
   If yes, would you mind naming which student/s and (briefly) write how the conversation/s went?

__________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________

22
Appendix F
Stack cards

“Knows a lot”

“Knows some”

“Doesn’t know”
Appendix G
Child verbal assent, task explanation script, and data form

“Hi, My name is _________. What’s your name?”

Child’s name: _____________________

“I’m trying to learn what kids like you think about the people around you. Would you like to help? You can stop at any time if you change your mind. And if you don’t want to answer something just say so and we’ll move on. Is that okay?”

“A couple short questions first. If you don’t know the answers that’s just fine.
“Do you know if either of your parents is a teacher?
   Yes  No
“Do you know if either of your parents is a doctor?
   Yes  No
“Do you know if either of your parents is a religious person, like a minister or rabbi?
   Yes  No
“Do you know what God is?
   Yes  No
“Do you think God is real, or is God pretend?
   Real  Pretend  Don’t know

“Ok, thank you! Now, we’re going to play a sorting game. What I’d like to do, is ask you about something, a topic, and then you could tell me how much you think these people [reveal the agent cards] know about it. Here we have parents, a teacher, a doctor, and this card with the letter G on it stands for God. You can pick which parents and teacher cards you want to use [the kids pick their cards]. After I bring up a topic, I’d like you to put these cards into these three stacks [reveal stack cards], based on what you think the people on them know. This completely filled-in circle stands for the “Knows the most” pile: anyone who you think knows the most should go here. If anyone else knows some, but not the most, about the topic, they can go in the “Knows some” pile, with the partly-filled circle. If someone doesn’t know anything about the topic, they go by this empty circle in the ‘Doesn’t know” pile. It’s okay if you don’t know about the topic; I just want to see what you think others know and I’m going to write down your answers for later. Is everything clear, or would you like to go over anything again? When we’re done you can keep the cards if you like, and you’ll get a set of stickers.” [begin]

[finish] “Thank you so much for helping! You did a great job! As I said, you can keep the cards if you want them, and you can take these stickers. Do you have any questions before you go?”
Appendix H
Questions and Score Sheet

**Actual**
1. Who knows why you can’t see the sun at night?
2. Who knows why some things melt when they got hot?
3. Who knows why some things float in water and other things sink?
4. Who knows what makes thunder and lighting?
5. Who knows how balloons float?

**Nonactual**
6. Who knows what the weather will be like next week?
7. Who knows how germs make you sick?
8. Who knows what happens to people and animals when they die?
9. Who knows what a Tyrannosaurus Rex’s favorite food was?
10. Who knows where angels live?

3 = Knows the most  2 = Knows some  1 = Doesn’t know

**Actual**

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4. God |   | 5. Teacher |   | Parent total |   |
| Parent |   | Parent |   | Teacher total |   |
| Teacher |   | God |   | Doctor total |   |
| Doctor |   | Doctor |   | God total |   |

**Nonactual**

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| God |   | Parent |   | Teacher total |   |
| Parent |   | Doctor |   | Doctor total |   |
| Doctor |   | Teacher |   | Teacher total |   |