Palestinian and American Children’s Understanding of Fantasy- and Reality-Based Fear

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Presented at the 2010 Conference on Human Development, New York

Abstract

Children from Western cultures more readily associate fear with fantasy-based (e.g., monsters) rather than reality-based events that pose real threat (e.g., mean dogs). Does this pattern generalize to children from non-Western cultures? Palestinians and Americans (3-7 years) told stories about what made a protagonist feel scared (Study 1). Compared to Americans, Palestinians told fewer fantasy-based, and more reality-based, fear stories. Americans (Study 2) and Palestinians (Study 3) (3-8 years) freely labeled stories depicting fantasy- and reality-based fears. Compared to Americans, Palestinians labeled fewer fantasy-based, and more reality-based, fear stories as scared. American children “see” fear more in fantastical events; Palestinians “see” fear more in realistic events.

Introduction

Fantasy is central to young children’s understanding of fear

• When asked to tell stories about what makes a protagonist feel scared (but not other emotions), children tell stories involving fantastical creatures (e.g., monsters) rather than real creatures (e.g., bears) (Denham & Zoller, 1991; Strayer, 1986).

• Preschoolers produce more fantasy-based fear stories than 7- and 8-year-olds who are more likely to describe realistic events (Strayer, 1986).

• Children attribute more intense fear to a protagonist in a fantasy-based fear story than in a reality-based one (Sayfan & Lagattuta, 2008, 2009).

The Current Research

Prior research has been based primarily on children from Western cultures.

→ In Study 1, Palestinian and American children told stories about the things that made a protagonist feel scared (and other emotions).

Children’s tendency to produce fantasy-based fear stories suggests that fantastical fears are more salient than realistic fears—these data do not tell us how children understand realistic fears.

→ Americans (Study 2) and Palestinians (Study 3) spontaneously labeled stories depicting fantasy- and reality-based fear events (and other emotions).

Study 1: Comparing Palestinian and American Children’s Stories of Fear-Eliciting Events

Participants

60 Palestinians (mean age=52.5 months) and 60 Americans (matched to Palestinian sample for age and for sex; mean age=53.3 months).

Each child was tested in his/her native language: Arabic or English

Task

Generate a possible cause and, separately, a consequence for fear (and other emotions)

Scoring

Stories were analyzed for the use of fantasy-based (e.g., monsters, ghosts) or reality-based events (e.g., negative interactions with animals or objects).

Questions:

• Do children produce fantasy-based stories for fear (but not for other emotions)?

• Are there cultural differences in the types of fear stories children tell?

Study 1 Results

American (Study 2) and Palestinian (Study 3) Children’s Recognition of Fantasy- and Reality-Based Fears

Participants

Study 2: 108 American children (54 males, 54 females; age range: 3-8 years, Mage= 5.2 years)

Study 3: 78 Palestinian children (39 males, 39 females; age range: 3-8 years, Mage= 5.6 years)

Task

Free-labeling brief emotion-eliciting stories, including stories depicting fantasy-based (e.g., monster in the closet; seeing a ghost/ werewolf in the bushes) and reality-based causes of fear (e.g., being chased by a dog; seeing a big spider/snake).

Questions:

• Do children label (recognize) reality-based fear stories as scared?

• Do their recognition of fantasy- and reality-based fear vary with culture?

Discussion

The often-reported pattern in which children understand fantasy-based before reality-based fear may be specific to Western cultures.

• Compared to Americans, Palestinians told more stories about real fears and fewer stories about fantastical fears (Study 1).

• Americans labeled fantasy-based fear stories as scared significantly more often than reality-based fear stories (Study 2).

• Palestinians labeled both reality- and fantasy-based fear stories as scared with equal probability (Study 3).

Imaginary creatures, such as monsters and ghosts, are more salient for Americans than for Palestinians, but remain a source of fear for children of both cultures, even at the age of 8 years.

Traditionally, it has been assumed that children acquire knowledge of an emotion’s causes by experience. These studies indicate that children fear imaginary creatures that have never harmed them.

• How do children acquire an understanding of fantasy-based fear?

References


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