Palestinian and American Children’s Understanding of Imaginary and Real Fears and Associated Behavioral Consequences

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Abstract
Palestinians and Americans (N=158, 3-8 years, Mage=67.1 months, equally divided between the two cultures, age- and sex-matched) freely labeled and generated a possible behavioral consequence for stories depicting fear— with either imaginary (e.g., monster in the closet) or realistic causes (e.g., snake in the sandbox)— and other emotions. Children labeled both imaginary and realistic causes of fear as scared but attributed qualitatively different behavioral consequences to each type of fear story—they attributed either inquisitive or escape-related behaviors to imaginary causes of fear (e.g., searching the closet; calling mom) but primarily escape-related behaviors to realistic causes of fear.

Introduction
• Imaginary causes are primary in young children’s concept for fear — at least in Western cultures
  • When asked to tell stories about the possible causes of fear, American and British preschoolers cite imaginary creatures (e.g., monsters, ghosts) more often than real threats to safety (e.g., attacking dogs, snakes) (Denham & Zoller, 1991; Strayer, 1986).
  • Cross-cultural research is rare but suggests that imaginary causes are a part of — but are not primary in— non-Western children’s concept for fear.
    • Palestinian children cited fewer imaginary and more realistic causes of fear than did American children (Kayyal, Widen, & Russell, 2011).
  • Prior research has been based on production measures (e.g., story-telling tasks)
    • The causes of fear—imaginary or realistic— that readily come to mind need not be only causes children associate with fear.
  • Nothing is known about the behavioral consequences children associate with imaginary and realistic causes of fear.

Current Study
• Participants: Palestinian and American children (N=158; equally divided between the two cultures, age- and sex-matched) in each of two age groups: younger (Mage=46.8 months) and older (Mage=79.8 months).
• Children heard brief stories depicting fear- and other emotion-eliciting events (happiness, sadness, and surprise)
  • Fear stories involved either imaginary causes (monster in the closet; werewolf in the bushes) or realistic causes (snake in the sandbox, being chased by a mean dog)
• Children freely label each story and generate a possible behavioral consequence

Results
• The Fear Type x Culture interaction was significant, F(4, 612)=37.79, p < .001
  • For realistic causes of fear, children primarily cited escape-related behaviors, significantly more often than any of the other behaviors, p < .001.
  • Children indicated that the protagonist will physically remove herself from the presence of the fear-eliciting stimulus.
• For imaginary causes of fear, children cited both escape- and inquisitive-related behaviors with equal probability.
  • Children indicated that the protagonist will either physically remove herself from the presence of the fear-eliciting stimulus or actively seek it out.
• Children rarely cited behaviors related to seeking help, diversion, or other.

Discussion
• Children’s concept for fear includes both imaginary and realistic causes, but neither one is primary
• Imaginary causes offer an advantage for Americans whereas realistic causes offer an advantage for Palestinians in evoking the concept of fear, at least between the ages of 3-8 years.
  • Children’s understanding of fear is influenced by children’s real-world experiences and cultural narratives; what varies by culture is the relative importance of the real and the imaginary (Widen, Kayyal, & Russell, 2011).
• Children labeled both imaginary and realistic fears as scary; but they attributed qualitatively different behavioral consequences to each one.
  • Inquisitive and escape-related behaviors were attributed to imaginary fears.
    • Children can distinguish between what is real and what is imagined, but sometimes become “absorbed” into their imagined worlds and treat them as if they were real (Harris, 1994).
• Escape-related behaviors were attributed to real fears, suggesting an active role in protecting oneself from real dangers.

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Figure 1. The proportion of Palestinian and American who "correctly" labeled imaginary- and realistic causes of fear as scared.

The table shows the proportion of each behavioral consequence associated with realistic and imaginary causes of fear.

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References

