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AUTHOR White, Edward; And Others
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ABSTRACT

This study investigated children's conceptions of death from a developmental perspective. Subjects were 170 children from grades K-4. Children were tested for conservation and interviewed, following story presentations about an elderly woman's death, to assess their understanding of three concepts concerning death: irrevocability, cessation of bodily processes, and universality. Two story versions were used: one depicted the woman as a "nice" person who was kind to children, the other as an unkind person. This variable significantly affected children's responses regarding cause of death. Understanding of universality, but not of the irrevocability of death and cessation of bodily processes, was significantly related to the children's level of cognitive development. (Author/SB)

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A STUDY OF COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT, CHARACTER ATTRACTIVENESS
AND CHILDREN'S CONCEPTIONS OF DEATH
EDWARD WHITE, Oklahoma State University
BILL ELSOM, Oklahoma State University
RICHARD PRAWAT, Oklahoma State University
THOMAS PARISH, Kansas State University

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The objective of this study was to examine the conceptions of death held by children in kindergarten through fourth grades. Specifically, three concepts were of interest: the irrevocability of death, the universality of death, and the cessation of corporeal life at death. Also of interest was the relationship that cognitive development and the attractiveness of the personality of the story character might have to the children's conception of death.

Notably, little previous research has been conducted which has investigated these relationships mentioned above. Of the few studies that have been reported (e.g., Childers & Wimmer, 1971; Koocher, 1973), some problems regarding investigative techniques have tended to obscure the findings that were being sought. For instance, both Childers and Wimmer (1971) and Koocher (1973) used open ended questions not preceded by the presentation of any specific information but were directed to rather abstract situations. It may be that a more accurate estimate of children's views regarding death can be attained by presenting less abstract questions. Thus, in this study a story about an elderly woman's death was read to children prior to the interview, and questions which dealt specifically with the woman's death were used to obtain responses.

Use of the stories also enabled the experimenters to manipulate a variable which may be of importance to subjects when asked to comment about a person's death—their attractiveness (kindness or unkindness toward others). Previous research has shown that personal attributes of story characters can affect children's moral judgments (Damon, 1975).

Method

Individual interviews were conducted with each of the 170 subjects from grades K-4. The subjects were taken one at a time from their classrooms and escorted to a testing room. The subjects were first presented with three conservation tasks taken from the Concept Assessment Kit devised by Goldschmid and Bentler. The purpose of the tasks was to determine the subjects' level of cognitive development. Each subject was then read a short illustrated story in which an elderly woman died. Two versions of the story were used. In one version, the elderly woman was kind to children and in the other version she was not kind to children.

In accordance with Piaget's theory, children were assumed to understand the concept (e.g., irrevocability) when they were able to give a justification or explanation for their belief. Chi-square tests for independence were used in all the analyses.

Interviews were structured in such a way as to elicit such responses from children. Scoring criteria were established prior to testing for each response. Two judges independently rated each subject's response, which was tape recorded and transcribed, comparing the subject's answer to the lists of acceptable responses for each concept. For example, the question concerning irrevocability asked "Will Mrs. Wilson be able to come back to life?" An explanation was sought for a "no" response with some of the following constituting acceptable responses: "You have only one life; "She is in heaven;" "She is buried."

Results and Discussion

The perception of the attractiveness of the character that died did significantly effect children's understanding of the cause of the woman's death

($X^2 = 18.36, p < .001$). In other words, nearly one-fourth of the students who heard the story about the unkind woman attributed the cause of her death to some unkind act she committed, while only one out of 85 students who heard the story about the kind woman attributed her death to her own actions.

Childers and Wimmer (1971), studying the concepts of universality and irrevocability of death, found that whereas understanding of universality increased markedly with age, especially between the ages of six and seven, understanding of irrevocability did not. The results of this study further demonstrated that this increasing understanding of the universality of death with age can more appropriately be attributed to an advance in cognitive development, from preoperational to concrete operational modes of thought. More specifically, children who utilized concrete modes of thought (i.e., conservers) were found to demonstrate a greater frequency of understanding of universality than children who utilized preoperational modes of thought (i.e., nonconservers) ($X^2 = 8.62, p < .005$).

TABLE I

PERCENT CONSERVERS AND NONCONSERVERS UNDERSTANDING IRREVOCABILITY, CESSATION, AND UNIVERSALITY

	Irrevocability		Cessation		Universality	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Conserver	33.33	66.67	32.10	67.90	61.73	38.27
Nonconserver	21.79	78.21	23.08	76.92	38.46	61.54

Interestingly, as one can glean from Table 1, an understanding of the irrevocability of death and the cessation of bodily functions was not demonstrated any more frequently by conservers than by nonconservers (for understanding of irrevocability, $X^2 = 2.64, p > .05$; for cessation of bodily functions $X^2 = 1.61, p > .05$). These data illustrate that apparently not all the concepts possessed by children are related to the logical operations of thought described by Piaget. Thus, although the concept of death's universality is closely tied to the development of concrete operational thought, the seemingly related concepts of death's irrevocability and its effect on corporeal life are not. Logical operations, then, may relate more to "spontaneous" (e.g., understanding of universality) than to "scientific" (e.g., understanding of irrevocability and cessation) concepts. The former concept being a function of cognitive growth while the latter concepts may primarily be a function of environmental experiences.

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