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 children’s coping with the death of a loved one. Traditionally, researchers in cognitive development have mainly focused on 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 particular, we review different methodological approaches that suggest that children form their understanding of death by engaging in conversations and question asking with family members, consuming cultural products, and actively participating in cultural rituals. We also provide some examples on how children combine different belief systems to form their understanding of death. Finally, we discuss recent research on how socialization with regards to death might be related to coping and bereavement after the death of a loved one.

Keywords: Understanding of death, explanatory co-existence, culture
Exploring children’s death understanding has a long tradition in developmental psychology (Piaget, 1929). Traditionally, it was believed that children were incapable of understanding the meaning of death until around 10 years of age (Carey, 1985; Piaget, 1929). However, changes in how death is conceptualized and related changes in methodology have led researchers to conclude that children have an earlier emerging understanding of death (Gutiérrez, Menendez, Jiang, Hernandez, Miller, & Rosengren, 2019; Rosengren, Miller, Gutiérrez, Chow, Schein, & Anderson, 2014; Speece & Brent, 1984). In this paper, we review research on children’s death understanding 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, poorly understood by children until the ages of 9 or 10 (Piaget, 1929). Carey (1985) argued that children only come to understand death when they know 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 multi-faceted concept, Speece and Brent (1992) proposed four key sub-components of death: universality (all living things die), finality (death is final and irreversible), non-functionality (death leads to the cessation of biological and psychological processes), and causality (death can be caused by different factors). By conceptualizing death in terms of these different sub-components, researchers have revealed 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 5 years of age, most children understand that death leads to 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 deconstructing death into these sub-components has been fruitful, it also has one glaring issue: this approach has treated 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). In order to examine these non-biological concepts of death, some researchers have proposed a fifth sub-component of death, non-corporeal continuity, which focuses on beliefs in the afterlife (Bering & Bjorklund, 2004; Bering, Blasi, & 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 co-exist 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?

A key question is not only when do children understand death, but how do they come to this understanding? Traditionally, researchers believed that children understood death from a uniquely biological perspective (Piaget, 1929). Research from this perspective sought to only characterize children’s biological understanding of death. In contrast, we believe that 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
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qualitative and quantitative methods allows researchers to examine how children make sense of the different information presented to them.

*Biological reasoning.* The traditional view has been that children’s understanding of death arises from a general understanding of biology. In one study from this perspective, Slaughter and Lyons (2003) provided children a lesson on the body and its systems, and then examined their understanding of death. They found that children who learned about the body had a better understanding of the causes of death. 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 between their biological reasoning, their experiences with death-related rituals, and parental socialization. Thus, children’s understanding of death is the product of children making sense of a variety of biological and spiritual information about death. Examples of this can be seen in cross-cultural work that shows 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). In order to examine how children come to understand death, it is important to take a socio-cultural approach that examines how children make sense of information that can appear to be in conflict (e.g., biological views of death and religious ones vary greatly on issues of finality). We argue that biological and religious information about death, which are often seen as being in conflict with each other, is often presented together in children’s media and parental conversations. 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 which furthers 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. There has been a breadth of research that shows 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). Knowing that there are cultural variations in children’s understanding of death raises the arguably more interesting question of how culture influences children’s conceptualizations of death. Below we draw from research on children’s understanding of death and the broader cognitive developmental field to argue for three potential ways cultures influence children’s understanding of death. 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 impact children’s understanding of death. Although there is evidence that culture also influences how people think about the biological world (ojalehto, Medin, Horton, Garcia, & Kays, 2015), we do not discuss this at length given that we are not aware of any work that connects different types of conceptualizations of biology specifically to children’s reasoning about death.

Parental conversations and question asking. 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 observable (e.g., whether a spirit continues to exist). Harris and Koenig (2006) suggested that
children rely on testimony from adults to build their understanding of phenomena that are generally unobservable. Testimony from adults have also been proposed to influence children’s endorsement of death and afterlife beliefs (Lane & Harris, 2014).

One issue with children potentially learning about death from adult testimony is that western societies have been viewed as attempting 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) might lead to the assumption that families rarely engage in conversations 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. Chouinard (2007) proposed that children’s question asking might be a central mechanism in children’s cognitive development. 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). Given that recent reports have found that many parents indicate that their children begin to ask questions about death as young as three years of age (Renaud, Engarhos, Schleifer, & Talwar, 2015), and that these questions were often sparked by a recent death in the family (Bridgewater, Menendez & Rosengren, under review), question asking might also be a key mechanism that children use to 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 young children predominantly ask questions about the sub-components of death, typically in very general terms (“What happens to people when they die?”), but some questions are more specific (“How old are you when you die?”). Many of these questions focus on the causes of death. Given that causality
is the last sub-component that children come to understand, they may be asking questions about
the sub-components they least understand in order 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 current death understanding.

An interesting finding emerging from research on children’s questions about death, is that
there appears to be a mismatch between the content of children’s questions and parents’
responses. Children predominantly ask questions about the biological sub-components of death,
but parents often provide religious information in response (Bridgewater et al., under review;
Gutiérrez et al., 2019). Children also rarely ask specific questions involving religious aspects of
death, yet parents’ responses often include religious or spiritual elements (e.g., references to
Heaven). One potential reason for this mismatch might be that 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 “your body stops working” or a religious
response “you go to Heaven.” Parents might assume that children might find biological
responses disturbing as 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 based information (Bluebond-
Langner, 1978; Gaab, Owens, & MacLeod, 2013). Some parents combine biological and
spiritual information either in the same answers or across multiple answers (Bridgewater et al,
under review). The fact that parents at least sometimes combine biological and spiritual
information suggests that children are exposed to multiple belief systems about death, and that at
least some children are likely acquiring a view of death that incorporates multiple belief systems at once.

Consumption of media. Children might also learn about death by observing how death is portrayed in media. A number of researchers have examined how death is portrayed in children’s books (Lee et al., 2014) and animated films (Cox, Garrett, & Graham, 2005; Tenzek & Nickels, 2017). In order to examine how frequently death is portrayed in children’s books, Rosengren et al. (2014) examined parents’ reports of their children’s favorite books and Caldecott Medal winners (an award for distinguished picture books given by the Association for Library Service to Children). They found that only 3% of these books depicted death. This stands in stark contrast to the top animated children’s films, 75% of which contained a death (Bridgewater et al., under review). However, many of the deaths portrayed in animated films were not depicted explicitly (e.g., the death occurred off-screen). This indicates that although children’s books rarely portray death, children’s films often do. One potential reason for the difference might be that depicting death implicitly is easier to portray in films than it is in books. This seems to be in line with findings that books with images portray death more often than books without images, even though books without images are generally meant to be read by older children (Poling & Hupp, 2008).

Researchers have also examined children’s books designed specifically for bereaved children. Although the majority of these books contain information about the biological sub-components of death, many included 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, researchers found that books about death from Western European countries depicted spiritual aspects of death more often than books from East Asian countries (Lee et al.,
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, it is likely that children receive culturally consistent information about death from their parents and the media, possibly containing both biological and non-biological perspectives on death.

Participation in cultural rituals. Recent studies have focused on the social functions of rituals, paying special attention to the role of rituals in defining groups and facilitating group cohesion (Watson-Jones & Legare, 2016). Here, we focus on children’s learning through observing and participating in cultural rituals (Rogoff, Mejía-Arauz, & Correa-Chávez, 2015). Ethnographic work by Gutiérrez, Rosengren, and Miller (2015) showed that children in Puebla, Mexico often participate in and help prepare for the día de los muertos (Day of the dead) celebration. During this celebration, families create ofrendas (altars) for dead relatives and place food for their visit. The majority of the children that participate in this celebration indicate that their dead relatives came to visit and that the dead consumed the food placed on the ofrendas, even though these same children understand that death is irreversible and that physical functions (like eating) stop after death (Gutiérrez et al., 2019). Other studies on children’s death understanding have used ethnographic field work to enrich quantitative approaches and improve our understanding of how children’s experiences with death rituals help shape their understanding of death (Astuti, 2000).

One conclusion to be drawn from past research is that children form their emerging death understanding by combining aspects of biological reasoning with concepts and symbols drawn from religious and broader cultural contexts. There is evidence that children first come to a biological understanding of death prior to integrating spiritual or religious dimensions, using
their existing biological concepts 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 co-existence of different explanatory beliefs (Busch et al., 2017; Legare et al., 2012). These co-existence 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 that looks at how children’s responses to questions about death are different depending on whether they are presented with a religious or a secular context (Astuti & Harris, 2008; Giménez & Harris, 2005; Lane et al., 2016). One example of the blended model is presented by Rosengren et al. (2014, pg. 27) in which 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 very long (imparting biological traits to spirits). These blended models can be difficult to identify, but some researchers have successfully used a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches to examine how children blend different belief systems (Gutiérrez et al., 2019; Rosengren et al., 2014). However, future work should explore how and when children combine different beliefs.

**Ramifications of children’s understanding of death**

Recent research suggests that different understandings of death influence how people respond to death. Research focusing on non-bereaving children has shown that a greater biological understanding of death is related to lower death anxiety (Slaughter & Griffiths, 2007) and 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 (Christ, 2000; Field, Tzadikario, Pel, & Ret, 2014). One study examined this issue in a retrospective manner by asking adults to remember how open their parents were when discussing death and how much their parents shielded them from death (Martinčeková et al., 2018). These researchers found that 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 might be important for children’s coping and death understanding. Future work should examine this issue more in-depth.

**Future directions**

There are a number of important directions for future research. First, although there is research examining children’s cognitive and affective understanding of death separately, very few studies explore both of these constructs in the same investigation. Future work should examine how children’s cognitive and affective understanding relate and how religion influences both constructs. Second, while there is research on the death-related content present in children’s media, there is currently little research on whether parents or children engage with this content. Although researchers report that children ask parents questions about death portrayed in movies (Bridgewater et al., under review), we don’t know much about if and how parents might use different forms of media as tools to teach children about death. Finally, there is very little research on 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. Past research with bereaving populations has involved clinicians and focused almost exclusively on children’s coping skills, not on their understanding of death. Research with non-bereaving children often asked whether the children have experienced the death of a loved one, but few
examine whether there are differences in children’s understanding of death between children
who have and have not lost a loved one (but see Panagiotaki et al., 2018).

Conclusions

Children seem to have a fairly sophisticated understanding of death by the age of six.
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 children to potentially 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 knowledge construction, we
suggest that it is important to use a variety of methods to gain a comprehensive view of
children’s understanding of death, and how this understanding may vary by context and culture.
To understand children’s conceptualizations of death, we need to explore in greater detail
children’s experiences with the death of a loved one, their affective responses to death, and how
religious beliefs may shape their reasoning about death. While preliminary evidence suggests
that children’s understanding of death might be related to how they cope with the death of a
loved one both in childhood and adulthood, future research should examine this relation in more
detail.
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