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Cognitive and Contextual Factors in the Emergence of Diverse Belief Systems: Creation versus Evolution

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Abstract

The emergence and distribution of beliefs about the origins of species is investigated in Christian fundamentalist and nonfundamentalist school communities, with participants matched by age, educational level, and locale. Children ($n = 185$) and mothers ($n = 92$) were questioned about animate, inanimate, and artifact origins, and children were asked about their interests and natural-history knowledge. Preadolescents, like their mothers, embraced the dominant beliefs of their community, creationist or evolutionist; 8- to 10-year-olds were exclusively creationist, regardless of community of origin; 5- to 7-year-olds in fundamentalist schools endorsed creationism, whereas nonfundamentalists endorsed mixed creationist and spontaneous generationist beliefs. Children's natural-history knowledge and religious interest predicted their evolutionist and creationist

beliefs, respectively, independently of parent beliefs. It is argued that this divergent developmental pattern is optimally explained with a model of constructive interactionism: Children generate intuitive beliefs about origins, both natural and intentional, while communities privilege certain beliefs and inhibit others, thus engendering diverse belief systems.



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Keywords

Key Words: analogy; conceptual development; constructivism; context; creationist; culture; essentialism; evolutionist; knowledge; naive biology, naive psychology; teleology

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Henry Weinman, Justin Barrett, Henry Bacher, Jean Miller and two anonymous reviewers provided insightful criticisms of earlier versions of the manuscript. I am especially indebted to the parents, children, and teachers from three midwestern Christian Fundamentalist schools and to families in nearby rural and suburban areas for their participation in the study. This research would not have been possible without the help of interviewers Cindy Andress and Susan Stewart and the artwork of Cindy Andress, who created the stimuli. Correspondence and requests for reprints should be addressed to E. Margaret Evans, Department of Psychology, University of Toledo, 2801 W. Bancroft Street, Toledo, Ohio 43606-3390. E-mail: mevans@uoft02.utoledo.edu

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