

Children's developing conceptions of the soul

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Summary

The study investigates children's developing conceptions of the soul. Children aged 5- and 10-years ($n = 80$) and a group of adults ($n = 160$) were interviewed about the nature, the ontological properties and the location of the soul. The results showed that at the age of 5 years children begin to form an understanding of the soul as an immaterial entity that inhabits the human body. At the age of 10 years, children, similarly to adults, begin to describe the soul as the centre of our emotional and mental functioning. However, unlike adults, 10-year-old children cannot as yet understand the soul as an entity that can exist separately from the body.

Introduction

Although there is no clear and universally accepted definition of the 'soul', in most cultures and religions the soul is described as a spiritual essence that inhabits and animates the body. The belief that humans do not only possess a mindful body but also a spiritual essence—a soul, a psyche—is deeply entrenched in human thought. This led Bloom (2005) to postulate that we are born dualists: we have a natural disposition to see the world “in terms of bodies and in terms of souls” (p. 191). The present study investigates this claim by examining children's developing ideas about the soul. In contrast to the large number of studies investigating children's understanding of the mind, there is a conspicuous absence of research addressing conceptions of the soul (Boyatzis, 1997). One of the very few studies available (Richert & Harris, 2006) reported that children aged 4- to 12-years can differentiate the soul from the mind. Children maintained that, in contrast to the mind, the soul is something that stays unchanged throughout life and is devoted to spiritual functions. An earlier study by Boyatzis (1997) showed that children attribute a soul more frequently to humans and other living organisms than to non-living artificial objects. Thus, isolated findings exist indicating that from a young age children conceive the soul as a substance that is distinct from the mind and also that they attribute a soul only to living—but not to non-living—entities. However, these studies offer a fragmentary picture of children's developing understanding of the soul. The research described here is part of an extended study exploring children's developing ideas about the soul. The study examines how children aged 5- and 10-years in comparison to adults describe the soul and what they believe are its ontological properties and location.

Method

Participants. Participants were 80 children and 160 adults ($M = 19.8$ years). Children were divided into two age-groups: 5-year-olds ($n = 40$, $M = 5.2$ years), 10-year-olds ($n = 40$, $M = 10.9$ years). All participants (adults and children) were Greek Orthodox Christians.

Task and Procedure. Participants were tested individually in their educational setting. The task included four open-ended questions concerning: (i) the nature of the soul: “*What is the soul?*”, (ii) its ontological properties: “*Can others see the soul?*” and “*Can others touch the soul?*”, and (iii) its location: “*Where is the soul?*”.

Results

Responses concerning the nature of the soul (“*what is the soul?*”) were content analysed and classified into seven categories shown in Table 1. The majority of the 5-year-olds (70%) stated that they “*did not know*” what the soul is. The few 5-year-olds who did give a definition described the soul principally with the statement: “*something inside us*”. In the 10-year-old group, 20% responded that the soul is the seat of our emotions and thoughts, 20% said that it is something inside us, whilst 22.5% described the ‘soul’ in metaphorical terms, by saying that it is synonymous to “*a good heart*”. Among adults the most frequent responses were either that the soul is “*the seat of emotions and our mental functions*” (34%) or that it is “*the immaterial and immortal part of our dual nature*” (30.1%).

Table 1. Percentages of responses to the question “what is the soul?” classified by age group

	5-years	10-years	Adults
Something inside us	17.5	20	-
Kindness/good heart	10	22.5	-
Life	2.5	7.5	2.7
Seat of emotions/mental functions	-	20	34
Immaterial part of our dual nature	-	10	30.1
Energy	-	-	7.7
Don't know	70	20	25.5

Asked whether the soul can be seen or touched, the majority of 5-year-olds responded that they “did not know”. However, as Figure 1 shows, there was a significant increase with age in the “no” responses [*be seen*: $\chi^2(2) = 146.8, p < .001$, *be touched*: $\chi^2(2) = 138.75, p < .001$], and, conversely, a decline in the “don't know” responses. Concerning the location of the soul, as Figure 2 indicates, significant variations were observed, $\chi^2(8) = 42.5, p < .001$. The most frequent response in the 5-year old group (57.5%) was “don't know”. However, some of the 5-year-olds responded –similarly to their older peers– that the soul is located either inside the body (5-year-olds: 15%, 10-year-olds: 37.5%) or in the heart (5-year-olds: 27.5%, 10-year-olds: 47.5%). In contrast, many of the 10-year-olds located the soul either in the heart (47.5%) or somewhere inside the body without, however, specifying exactly where (37.5%).

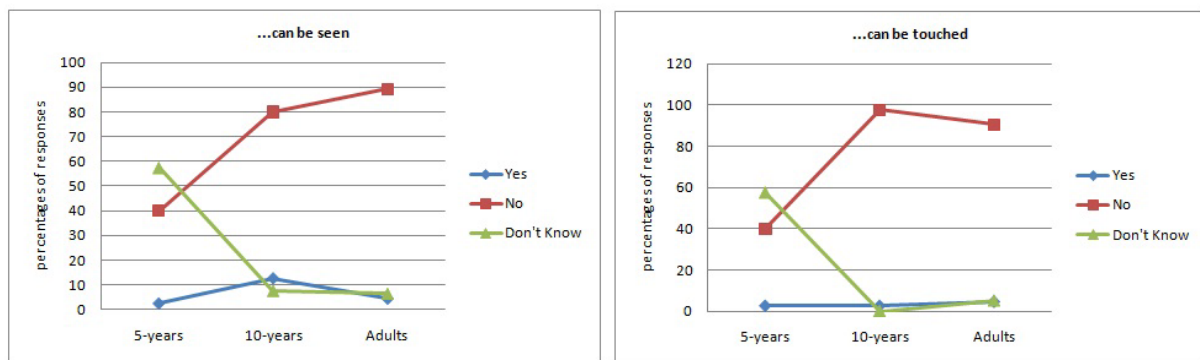


Figure 1. Percentages of responses to the questions “can the soul be seen?” and “can the soul be touched?” classified by age group

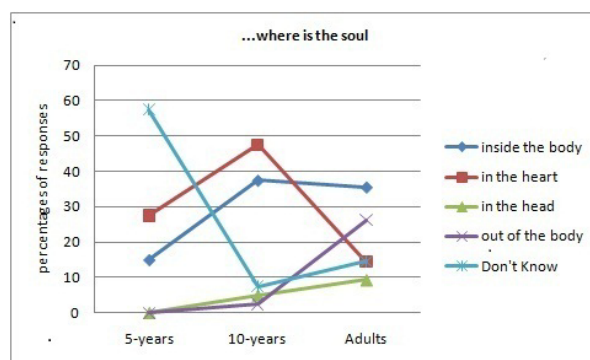


Figure 2. Percentages of responses to the question “where is the soul?” classified by age group

Discussion

Our results reveal that 5-year-old children have a very restricted conception of the soul. From the age of 10 years, children begin to describe the soul, similarly to adults, as an entity that is critical to emotional and mental functioning. Still many 10-year-old children confuse the soul with a “good heart”, plausibly misinterpreting the meaning of the everyday metaphorical expression: “(s)he is a good soul”. Interestingly, approximately a quarter of our adult participants also reported being unsure of what the soul is, which could be interpreted as evidence that the soul concept is probably not fully organized even at the age of 20 years.

Judgments about the ontological properties of the soul indicate that the majority of the 10-year-old children conceive of the soul as an entity that cannot be seen or touched. Similarly to their older peers, 40% of the 5-year-olds claimed that the soul cannot be perceived through the outer senses. This indicates that, although 5-year-old children are unable to verbally describe what the soul is, the understanding of its ontological status begins to emerge from this age. The significant increase in the “*it cannot be seen*” and “*it cannot be touched*” responses in the 10-year-old group indicates that the belief that the soul is an immaterial (spiritual) essence becomes consolidated with age.

The majority of 5-year-old children were unsure about the location of the soul, although, similarly to the 10-year-olds, some children from this age-group located it somewhere inside the body. Ten-year-old children were uncertain about the exact location of the soul inside the body, but they were more inclined to locate it in the heart than in the head. In contrast to adults, no 10-year-old child located the soul outside the body –which indicates that at 10 years children do view the soul as an entity that cannot exist outside the body.

In sum, our findings suggest that in spite of their inability to verbally describe the soul, younger children (5-year-olds) have an emerging conception that the soul as an immaterial entity that is located somewhere inside the body. Older children (10-year-olds) associate the soul with our mental and emotional functioning; yet they are –as yet– unable to distinguish it from the body. Overall, our results indicate that the conception of the soul as a spiritual substance that is separate from the body is a late development. Further research with other age groups will be helpful for completing the picture of this developmental trajectory.

References

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