

Surviving in the world of the machines: the developmental psychologists' account of magical beliefs in the age of science

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The hypothesis under test was that initially, magical beliefs (MB) appear in children as a legitimate, conscious form of beliefs that coexist with the belief in physical causality; later, under the pressure from science and religion, MB go into the domain of the subconscious. If this main hypothesis is true, then the following empirical phenomena should be observed: (1) Young and preschool children should endorse MB to the same extent that they endorse the belief in physical causality, both in their verbal explanations of unusual effects and in their behavioral reactions; (2) At a certain period of school age, magical explanations disappear from children's verbal accounts about causes of physical effects, yet they can be easily reactivated if unexplained causal effects that assert magic are shown to them; (3) Being a significant part of preschool and elementary school children's everyday experience, early magical thinking positively affects children's performance on creative cognitive tasks; (4) When asked to explain unusual causal effects that assert magic, adults will deny magical explanations of such effects, even if these effects are repeatedly shown to them; (5) When psychological defense against magical influence is relaxed (for example, when denying the possibility of magic involves a high cost or when magic affects fantastic and not real objects), rational adults will retreat to magical behavior; (6) When confronted with magical intervention in their lives, either in the form of observing magical phenomena (cognitive intervention) or in the form of a sorcerer trying to exert influence with the help of magic (emotional intervention), adults will resist such intervention: they will either ignore magical phenomena (cognitive defense) or deny that magical influence had any effect on their lives (emotional defense). Experiments examining the above predictions will be presented and discussed.