

TWCF0020-WP3 Project Summary

Afterlife and Pre-life Beliefs

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Do Chinese children naturally assume that other agents are mortal, immortal, or have no bias in either direction (Astuti & Harris, 2008; Bering & Bjorklund, 2005)? What is the developmental course of such thinking? Could such biases provide cultural support for ancestor and spirit based practices even in the face of institutional opposition? Research to date concerning afterlife and pre-life beliefs (that a person has existence before conception) has produced conflicting results based on the methodologies used and populations examined and remains, perhaps, the hottest area of study in relation to religious thought. Bering and collaborators have found that even adults who regard themselves as believing that there is no life after death still find themselves reluctant to say that some epistemic and desire states cease upon death. Astuti & Harris (2008) found that answers to such questions are influenced by the discourse context: medical primes lead to more extirpative, dis-continuity responses. Bek & Lock's (forthcoming) replication of Astuti & Harris' work raised the possibility that afterlife thinking is the default mode and adults have to be primed to think in terms of death being the end. Research with children is just as mixed with Bering and collaborators finding afterlife (and prolife – see Emmons & Bering) beliefs decrease with age, suggesting people must be culturated out of such beliefs rather than into them; while Harris and colleagues have reported just the opposite pattern. The current project will help to test the universal or cultural-specific development of children's afterlife concept.

As to the prolife beliefs, the project will investigate Chinese children's understanding of origins of species from the perspective of creation versus evolution of ideas. Almost half of the US public rejects the idea that humans originated via evolution rather than by supernatural design (Evans, 2011) and 30% of older children and adults entertain mixed beliefs, accepting evolutionary origins for non-human species and creationism for humans (Evans, 2011; Sinatra et al., 2003). Though teleological views of species origins are found in American children and adults, Chinese children were seldom exposed to creationist ideas and their understanding of origins of species hasn't been explored. The current project would investigate how Chinese children understand origins of species. The study will provide insights into the way how children process information about natural and supernatural causation.