

Researcher finds culture, environment shape children's beliefs about their own knowledge

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Developmental psychologist Stanka Fitneva (seen here addressing study participants) has published new research on how cultural surroundings shape children's beliefs about their own and their parent's knowledge. Credit: Queen's University

New research by Queen's University developmental psychologist Stanka

Fitneva has found that culture and environment can impact when and how children identify their own areas of knowledge and those of the adults in their lives.

"Children do not know everything that [adults](#) know, nor do adults know everything that [children](#) know," explains Dr. Fitneva. "While prior research has allowed us a greater understanding of when this differentiation in understanding between adult- and child- specific [knowledge](#) takes place, much of the research has taken place in the West. In this study, we examined whether cultural factors may play a role how these beliefs are formed."

The study examined two sets of children, consisting of 24 four year-old and 24 seven year-old children, in both Canada and Japan. Despite both being modern, technologically-advanced democracies, the two nations differ in their approach to the role of the individual as part of the larger society and the importance given to one's elders. Dr. Fitneva hypothesized this difference could impact how children and adults both consider what the other knows and understands.

The children were asked to identify whether certain abilities or types of knowledge would be more likely to be held by an adult or a child. The children were then asked to describe their own knowledge of the same items and tasks, and asked to identify knowledge or skills that children would be more likely to possess than adults. The parents of these children also participated by filling out a questionnaire, which included questions asking what their children knew that they might not – such as the names of characters from Spongebob Squarepants, or other topics relating to popular child-specific programs.

Dr. Fitneva noted a difference between the samples in how children recognized their own knowledge and that of their peers. All children successfully identified "adult" knowledge or skills such as 'knowing how

to make chicken soup'. However, Japanese children's self-reported knowledge more strongly correlated with their overall view of what children should know – suggesting they viewed their own knowledge as being similar to their peers, rather than assuming that they stood out from the group. The researchers conclude that cultural factors could contribute to this difference in how children interpret the knowledge of adults.

"As we expected, beliefs about adult-specific knowledge would develop first in both cultures and beliefs about child-specific knowledge are more strongly related to a child's own knowledge in the Japanese sample," says Dr. Fitneva.

Across cultures, the study noted that children develop beliefs about what adults know before they are able to identify their own areas of knowledge. Dr. Fitneva says that further research is needed to fully understand how children develop their sense of age-specific knowledge and when a child's actual knowledge level diverges from their sense of what they know.

More information: Stanka A. Fitneva et al. Japanese and Canadian Children's Beliefs about Child and Adult Knowledge: A Case for Developmental Equifinality?, *PLOS ONE* (2016). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0163018](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0163018)

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