Animism

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Although the idea of animism dates to early philosophers and scientists such as Stahl, Hume, Zenophanes, Tiedemann, Froebel, Comte, Sully, and Rasmussen, the modern conceptualization of animism is generally credited to the British anthropologist E. B. Tylor's 1871 seminal work *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom*. The concept has also been explored by sociologists (e.g., Emile Durkheim), anthropologists (e.g., Margaret Mead), and psychologists (e.g., Jean Piaget). Given the lengthy history and multidisciplinary use of the term "animism," it is not surprising that several different definitions of the term have emerged.

Tylor initially defined animism as a belief in "spirit beings," which he believed to be common to all religions. This definition has generally fallen out of favor among researchers and is less useful than other, more recent conceptions of animism. A second, more commonly used definition of animism is the belief that some natural phenomena (e.g., animals, rocks, plant life) are endowed with spirits. Although use of this definition is widespread among sociologists and ethnographers, psychologists have generally used another definition of animism for what they have called "psychological animism" (Read, 1915). Within Jean Piaget's (and most psychologists') studies of animism, the term refers to attributing life and consciousness to lifeless entities. This occurs, for example, when a child asserts that the moon and clouds go walking together (Piaget, 1930). Piaget noted the confusion that may arise from use of this term, but found it to be appropriate nonetheless. He also anticipated that some may be tempted to compare indigenous people to children, given that the original definition of animism had been used to describe the spiritual practices of these people, though he declined to make this link himself (Piaget, 1929).

Piaget generally referred to so-called "child animism" as an immature way of conceiving the world, used to some extent by all younger children (though the influence could persist into adulthood). He addressed the concept of animism in children in two of his early works: the classic *The Child's Conception of the World* (1929) and the lesser known *The Child's Conception of Physical Causality* (1930). In *The Child's Conception of the World*, Piaget described four stages of child animism. In stage one children ascribe consciousness/life to all objects that are active in any way, even if the object is stationary. Children in stage two only associate consciousness/life with moving objects, and those in stage three only attribute consciousness/life to those objects that can move without outside input. Finally, in stage four, consciousness/life is only thought to occur in animals or plants and animals, as (most) adults believe.

In *The Child's Conception of the World*, Piaget also discussed the relatively unstructured interview methods that he used to derive his theory of child animism. Later researchers, especially Roger W. Russell, would work to create more standardized methods of evaluating animism in children. Despite this effort, no one method was ever universally adopted for evaluating animism. A final important aspect of *The Child's Conception of the World* is Piaget's view on the origins of child animism. Although a full discussion of Piaget's ideas concerning the genesis of animistic thought is beyond the scope of this entry, it should be noted that Piaget acknowledged at least one aspect of culture as important to the development of animistic thought: language. However, he regarded language as a secondary and relatively unimportant factor.

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In the three decades following publication of Piaget's works, considerable empirical, cross-cultural work investigated animism in children. By 1958, studies on animism had been completed in Native American reservations, China, England, Sweden, Papua New Guinea, the United States, and Ghana. Results from these studies were varied, with work by Russell and Dennis (1939) generally supporting Piaget's stages of animism, while results from other studies (Askar, 1932; Huang, Chen, & Yang, 1935; Huang & Lee, 1945; Klinberg, 1957; Mead, 1932) did not support Piaget's position that animism is universal in children. Huang and Lee's data were so antithetical to Piaget's work that they sparked an "animism controversy" (see Klinberg, 1957; Smeets, 1973; Strauss, 1951). Following Jahoda's (1958a) review of cross-cultural research on child animism, a handful of studies have examined animism in diverse populations, including Native Americans (Madsen, 1982), Canadians (Berzonsky, 1973), and the Japanese (Inagaki & Sugiyama, 1988), though cross-cultural interest in animism has waned somewhat in recent years.

In contrast to the work that has compared results across countries, several researchers have attempted to identify specific cultural variables that may affect animism in children. For example, Greenfield and Bruner (1966) suggested that animism may be much less common in collectivistic cultures that place less emphasis on one's individual subjectivity, based on results of experiments with Senegalese and Eskimo children (Bruner, Olver, & Greenfield, 1966). Another cultural variable that may influence animistic beliefs is religion. For example, Sharp, Candy-Gibbs, Barlow-Elliott, and Petrun (1985) found that northern Unitarian children displayed less animistic beliefs and used somewhat different reasoning to determine if an entity had life than southern Baptist children. Tomlinson-Keasey and Keasey (1972) took a somewhat different approach to studying the effects of culture on animistic beliefs. They noted that their sample of children from the 1970s showed less animism than samples from the 1940s and the 1920s, and concluded that this decline in animistic beliefs represented long-term cultural changes, specifically the rise of science within modern culture.

The most recent wave of interest in animism was sparked by the publication of Susan Carey's (1985) book, *Conceptual Change in Childhood*. Carey claimed that young children's tendency to favor animistic explanations was not due to a general immaturity (as Piaget asserted), but rather to an ignorance of biological knowledge. However, more recent work conducted by Kayoko Inagaki and the late Giyoo Hatano (2002, 2006) in Japan has challenged this assumption, and convincingly argued that children possess a "naïve biology" that provides more coherent and complex explanations and predictions of biological phenomena than Carey or Piaget's theories of animism originally predicted. Inagaki and Hatano (2006, p. 180) noted that future research should "focus on how naïve biology emerges, develops, and changes in various ecological and cultural settings."

Review of more than 70 years of cultural research concerning animism clearly shows that culture plays more than a secondary role in the development and perpetuation of animistic thinking, as Piaget originally asserted. The widely varied results of investigations of animism in different cultures and studies of specific cultural variables' influence on animistic tendencies have demonstrated the importance of culture to animistic beliefs. Though debates will likely continue concerning the etiology, developmental course, extent, and nature of animism, it is certain that these debates must be based in a multicultural context that acknowledges the rich diversity of beliefs present throughout the world.

SEE ALSO: Cognitive Development – Piagetian Stages; Piaget, Jean

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