

**Do people think the soul is separate from the body and the mind?**

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## **Introduction**

Some of the most exciting ideas develop through an off-hand question that you realize does not seem to have an obvious answer.

After completing graduate school, I (Rebekah Richert) had the opportunity to continue my education through a National Science Foundation (NSF)-funded post-doctoral research experience that allowed me to spend one year studying with Dr. Harvey Whitehouse (an anthropologist) and a second year studying with Dr. Paul Harris (a developmental psychologist). As I began my second year of this training with Dr. Harris, we began by reading a book that had been recently published by Paul Bloom (2004), *Descartes' Baby*. In this text, Bloom (2004) argued that human minds operate in accordance with a common-sense dualism in which, from infancy, humans distinguish agents as having 'bodies' and 'souls.' The support for this supposition comes from a wealth of studies into the development of social cognition and understanding the mental states of others. While reading this book, Dr. Harris and I began to discuss what might be underlying cognitive processes that support the development of a soul concept. Having grown up in a religious home and having spent a lot of time around other religious people, my intuition was that people who believe in the soul believe it goes beyond psychological traits and characteristics; they would not 'reduce' a person's soul to that person's preferences, beliefs, desires, memories, etc.

At this point, my advisor posed a rather straightforward question that did not have an obvious answer: If people do not believe the soul is about the mind and mental processes, then what do people think the soul is about?

### **The soul: Mentalistic or essential?**

Around this same time, Susan Gelman (2003) released a book summarizing a body of studies outlining essentializing (e.g., the idea that entities have an underlying, non-obvious, “true” nature) and how the tendency toward essentializing plays an important role in early cognitive development. Toddlers and young children tend to assume members of a category share an internal essence that makes them a member of that category and the same as other members of that category (Gelman, 2003). At that time, despite a relatively large and growing body of research documenting essentialism in early childhood, I could not find any psychological research documenting whether children or adults attributed an individual and personal essence to a person. As Bloom (2004) had outlined in *Descartes’ Baby*, much of the existing research on dualism was based in attributions of psychological versus biological properties.

Thus, our first study began with a very simple question: Do children view there to be a part of a person that is not accounted for by biological or psychological processes? We began our study of this question with children for two primary reasons (Richert & Harris, 2006). First, my advisor and I are developmental psychologists primarily driven by research questions about how cognitions develop, because the study of concept development can reveal the cognitive foundations of cognitive processes. Additionally, one way to examine these questions is to figure out what (if any) aspects of a person children believe continue after a person dies. Studies at that time had suggested that children come to believe biological processes (e.g., eating) stop at death but that psychological processes (e.g., remembering) continue after death (Astuti & Harris, 2008; Bering & Bjorklund 2004). This pattern of responding in children indicated that children separate the functions of the mind from the body when thinking about what happens after death. We expanded these studies to examine if children additionally separated the functions of the soul from the functions of the mind.

We tested 4- to 12-year-old children who had been raised in religious homes and exposed to the concept of the soul (some Lutheran, some Catholic). We were especially interested in what processes children attributed to the soul that they may not have attributed to the brain or the mind. For the first study, we tested children's beliefs about what aspects of a person were influenced by a religious ritual. We hypothesized that if children believe an aspect of a person exists that is not the body or the mind, that is the aspect that would be influenced by spiritual activities. Indeed, we found children were more likely to say the soul was changed after a baptism, rather than the mind or the brain. In the second study, we found that children attributed different kinds of processes to the soul than to the mind or the brain. In particular, children tended to say the soul (but not the mind or the brain) has spiritual functions and remains constant over time.

Thus, the answer to the question, "If it's not the mind, then what is it?" appeared to be that children believed the soul was a stable part of a person, distinct from the mind and the body, serving that person's spiritual functions (e.g., communicating with God, going to heaven after death). We followed up on these findings (2008) to examine (a) if these distinctions persist into adulthood, and (b) the influence of these concepts of the soul on ethical decision-making.

### **Testing the theory**

Our goal (2008) was not only to examine what characteristics people judge as the defining features of either the soul or the mind, but also to test two competing hypotheses that other researchers had put forth. The first hypothesis claimed that the notion of a soul as a separate entity from one's body is intuitive (Bering, 2006; Bloom, 2004). That is, starting as early as infancy, humans will readily attribute psychological abilities (e.g., ability to feel emotions or have goals) to other humans and animals, and they may even claim that some of

these abilities continue to exist after a person dies. After all, it is difficult trying to imagine not being able to imagine (Bering, 2006).

The other hypothesis takes this a step further by claiming that there is not only a difference between soul and body but also between mind and soul (Astuti & Harris, 2006; Richert & Harris, 2006). This position separates cognitive functions associated with the mind (e.g., thinking) and spiritual functions associated with the soul (e.g., immortality). This hypothesis is influenced by evidence showing that some cultures endorse the belief that when an individual dies, they continue living as an ancestor and are still able to interact with family members, but yet are limited in some capacities (e.g., seeing people).

In order to test these competing hypotheses, we created a study derived from our previous studies with children by testing a different population: young adults. We specifically chose this age group because we hypothesized that young adults' concept of a soul results from long-term exposure to their own religious upbringing and cultural traditions. We examined whether the differences evident in childhood persisted and perhaps became even further delineated into adulthood. Additionally, we examined whether participants' beliefs about the soul were more predictive of their responses to ethical questions than their beliefs about the mind. We tested our questions with a group of undergraduate students who were diverse both religiously (e.g., Christian, Non-Affiliated, Buddhist) and ethnically (e.g., Asian, Latino/Hispanic, White, African American).

## **Method**

We created an online survey that included questions about the *existence* of both the mind and the soul, including (a) belief in existence, (b) when (if ever) each begins, (c) if each remains

constant over time or can develop and change, and (d) what happens to each at death. We also asked about the *function* of the mind and soul by asking participants to imagine losing their mind or soul and to report what would happen to several cognitive (e.g., my ability to remember) and spiritual (e.g., my ability to continue on after I die) abilities. Because the soul is often associated with some type of spiritual essence in religious communities, we also created combined variables that indicated how ‘spiritual’ participants’ concepts of the mind or soul were. For example, a person with a very spiritual concept of the soul would believe the soul “(a) exists before birth, (b) does not change, (c) survives death, (d) contributes to a person’s life force, (e) contributes to a person’s ability to live on after they die, (f) contributes to a person’s ability to connect to a higher power and (g) contributes to a person’s spiritual essence” (Richert & Harris, 2008: p. 108).

Lastly, we asked participants about their views of the mind and soul for three ethical issues: stem cell research, life support, and human cloning. We asked participants whether they believed embryos, a person on life support, and a human clone have a mind or a soul. Then we asked participants if they believed scientists should be allowed to use embryonic stem cells, if a person in a persistent vegetative state should be disconnected from life support, and if scientists should create human clones.

## **Results**

Overall, participants did treat the *existence* of the mind and soul differently. Specifically, participants were more certain of the existence of the mind than the soul (though almost all claimed they both existed). Most thought that the mind begins at conception, during pregnancy, or at birth; that the mind is able to change and develop over time; and that the mind stops

existing at death. However, most participants claimed that the soul begins prior to conception, at conception, or at birth (indicating that the soul begins before the mind); the soul is able to change and develop across time (although less than the mind); and the soul continues existing after death in some form.

We also found that participants treated the *functions* of the soul and mind differently. Specifically, participants tended to claim that they would lose more cognitive functions if they lost their mind, but they would lose more spiritual functions if they lost their soul. That is, if you imagine losing your mind, you are more likely to claim that you'll also lose the ability to remember, solve problems, or tell right from wrong. But if you imagine losing your soul, you are more likely to think about the implications of the afterlife or connection to a higher power. Participants were relatively evenly split in if they thought a person could no longer feel emotions after losing the mind or soul, yet participants did not differ in their judgments between losing the mind or soul.

In terms of soul spirituality versus mind spirituality, we found that similar to children (Richert & Harris, 2006), adult participants also viewed the soul as more spiritual than the mind. When we added up the seven variables described above that were used to measure spirituality for both mind and soul, we discovered that participants attributed more of these spiritual attributes to the soul than to the mind. In fact, most of the participants assigned at least one of these seven characteristics to the soul, whereas hardly any participants attributed these same characteristics to the mind.

Finally, we found that participants treated the mind and soul differently for each ethical issue. Specifically, participants for the most part did not support, or were not sure about, using embryos for stem cell research, and they were more likely to claim that embryos have a soul than

a mind. However, participants were pretty evenly split in their decision of whether or not an individual in a vegetative state should be disconnected from life support, and participants overwhelmingly thought that individuals in vegetative states were more likely to have a soul than a mind. Lastly, participants were more likely to claim that human clones have a mind than a soul, and over half of the participants did not think scientists should make human clones.

As with the research with children, these findings suggested adults also distinguish the soul from the mind. In addition, concepts of the soul are related to individuals' ethical decision-making, but concepts of the mind are not.

### **Extending the theory**

I conducted a study to follow up on these findings with a graduate student (Richert & Smith, 2012). Dr. Erin Smith and I specifically wanted to examine what aspects of the soul concept are related to ethical decision-making when people are thinking about beginning-of-life (abortion, embryonic stem cell research) or end-of-life (euthanasia, disconnecting people from life support, suicide) ethical dilemmas. With a diverse sample of undergraduates, we first demonstrated that Christians, Agnostics, and Buddhists had similar conceptions of the soul to those documented in Richert and Harris (2008), although Buddhists were somewhat more likely to assign cognitive functions to the soul than Christians or Agnostics. Regarding ethical dilemmas, we found that participants' beliefs about the nature of the soul (what the soul is), but not about the functions of the soul (what the soul does), predicted their responses to the ethical dilemmas. Specifically, participants were less likely to endorse abortion, embryonic stem cell research, and suicide if they believed the soul starts before birth and remains constant over a person's life.

This theory has been further examined by a current graduate student studying with me (Kirsten [McConnel] Lesage), who has co-authored this chapter. Here, she describes how this approach informed her senior thesis while she was an undergraduate at Northwestern College (McConnel & Edman, 2013a; 2013b):

“Although uncommon, there are individuals who do believe that the soul is about the mind and mental processes, and that the body and soul are joined together as one, physical entity. This view is called monism and is different from the more commonly-held, dualistic view of the soul that claims the body and soul are distinct, separate entities. For my honors thesis as an undergraduate, I was interested in the idea that people can use different types of cognitive processing when thinking about a concept: slow, reflective processing in which people can think about the concept as long as they wish, and fast, intuitive processing in which people have to answer with the first thing that comes to mind (Kahneman, 2011; McCauley, 2011). Previous research examining the soul claimed that a dualistic notion of the soul is intuitive, and a monistic view of the soul is counterintuitive (Bloom, 2007). If these claims are true, then individuals should use fast, intuitive processing (i.e., online processing) when thinking about the soul in dualistic terms but slow, reflective processing (i.e., offline processing) when thinking about the soul in monistic terms. This might even lead monistic individuals to supporting dualistic notions of the soul when they are asked to respond as fast as possible because the “intuitive dualism” could override their reflective beliefs.

I tested these claims by giving undergraduate students an online processing task containing 28-statements either supporting monism or dualism. Participants had only 5-seconds to read each statement and indicate if they agreed with the statement or not. Contrary to the claims of previous research, my results indicated that the monist participants agreed with the

statements supporting monism and disagreed with the statements supporting dualism - showing that they did not resort to dualistic beliefs when they did not have time to think about their response. Dualist participants showed the same pattern for dualistic statements. However, both groups of participants took more time to respond to the monistic statements, indicating that there might still be some support to the claim that dualism is intuitive and monism is not.”

### **New research**

Debates about the cognitive foundations of the soul concept continue. Here, we provide examples from fields related to the cognitive science of religion, of new research that revolves around two themes: debates about intuitive mind-body dualism, and the influence of cultural context on the developing soul concept.

**Questioning intuitive dualism.** Similar to the research described above (McConnel & Edman, 2013a; 2013b), one primary line of new research has continued to examine how people view the relation between the body, the mind, and the soul. Lindeman, Riekkki, and Svedholm-Hakkinen (2015) identified three different types of views that tend to characterize how an individual sees the relation between the body, the mind, and the soul: monists (who attribute biological, psychobiological, and psychological processes only to the brain), emergentists (who attribute biological, psychobiological, and psychological processes to both the mind and the brain), and spiritualists (who attribute biological, psychobiological, and psychological processes to the soul, mind, and brain). Unlike Richert and Harris’s (2008) study, Lindeman et al. (2015) did not ask participants about the spiritual functions of a person, although we would hypothesize that the spiritualists would be more likely to associate spiritual functions to the soul than the monists or emergentists.

Roazzi, Nyhof, and Johnson (2013) further distinguished the concept of the soul from concepts of spirit. Roazzi et al. (2013) hypothesized that while the soul may develop from cognitive foundations rooted in essentializing, a separate concept of spirit may derive from intuitive beliefs in a vital (life-sustaining) force. Roazzi et al. (2013) found that adults in Brazil were less likely to differentiate the functions of the soul from those of the mind and brain than participants in Indonesia or the United States. Roazzi et al. (2013) also found that all participants tended to associate a person's passion with their spirit rather than their soul.

Based on this kind of psychological evidence, and further drawing on anthropological and historical evidence, Hodge (2008) has argued that the concept of the soul being distinct from the mind suggests that a mind-body dualism is not an intuitive cognitive stance. Hodge and colleagues have followed up on this theoretical approach in several compelling pieces tying concepts of the soul to the socially embodied nature of reasoning about others (e.g., Hodge 2011).

**Culture and concept development.** Within the field of developmental psychology, recent research has continued to examine how the concept of the soul develops and has extended that research to examine differences in soul concepts in varying cultural contexts (Emmons & Kelemen, 2014, 2015; Watson-Jones, Busch, Harris, & Legare 2016).

In a recent study, Watson-Jones et al. (2016) examined beliefs in both Vanuatu and the United States about what bodily functions continue after death. Similar to prior studies, they found that children and adults in the US viewed psychological functions, but not biological functions, as continuing after death. However, children and adults in Vanuatu claimed that both psychological and biological functions continue after death. These findings are important as they show that individuals' views of the soul are shaped by the culture in which they are raised. As

such, these findings speak to the importance of gathering cross-cultural evidence before drawing conclusions about the extent to which certain intuitive cognitive processes are *universally* intuitive, as well as for understanding the developmental mechanisms through which certain cognitive processes become intuitive.

In a complementary line of research, Emmons and Kelemen (2014, 2015) have examined pre-life conceptions. Although they did not ask children specifically about the soul, the researchers asked urban-raised children and rural indigenous children in Ecuador if six different bodily functions (biological, psychobiological, perceptual, epistemic, emotional, and desire) existed at three different time-points in an individual's life: pre-life, in utero, and infancy. Consistent with the finding that children and adults are more likely to view the soul than the mind as existing before a person is born (Richert & Harris, 2006, 2008), children in both settings claimed that emotions and desires existed pre-life and during the fetal period, but epistemic functions (e.g., to think) did not (Emmons & Kelemen, 2014). Additionally, children believed that emotional states and desires were not necessarily the product of physical maturation, unlike epistemic states (Emmons & Kelemen, 2015). Together with findings suggesting children and adults largely support the view that most psychological functions continue to exist after death (e.g., Bering, 2002; Richert & Harris, 2006, 2008), one developmental possibility is that the infants and children broadly essentialize by assuming humans (as well as animals and objects) have some kind of undefined, non-obvious element that imparts identity or category membership. When specifically applied to humans, a person's essence then can be further differentiated (through cultural learning) into mind and soul.

### **Essential mis-steps**

One of my favorite aspects of studying religious thinking is the cross-disciplinary conversations and debates that it fosters. However, for students interested in the cognitive science of religion, I would like to share some wisdom gained through trial, error, and linguistic mis-steps in my first forays into cross-disciplinary discussions. My early presentations of the findings described in this chapter occurred in the context of conferences and academic audiences with which I was familiar, primarily developmental psychologists and cognitive scientists. For these audiences, the term essentialism, once defined in a psychological framework, was readily and unproblematically accepted. Within the fields of developmental psychology and cognitive science, the human tendency toward essentialism is generally viewed a productive cognitive adaptation that facilitates learning in early childhood (for example, see Gelman, 2003).

I had a very different experience the first time I was invited to present this research at an interdisciplinary meeting. As soon as I used the term ‘essentialism,’ I could feel the room turn against me. In fields within the humanities, such as religious studies, cultural studies, and history, essentialism and essentializing are primarily discussed in the context of their negative outcomes. In the same way that psychological essentialism promotes assignment to and inductions about category membership that can support early learning, these cognitive intuitions have varieties of negative and harmful outcomes when used to remove an individual’s identity and only assign to that person the ‘essences’ that we associate with membership in a particular social category. In this way, essentialism can lead to racism, sexism, and homophobia. It can be used to support and promote discrimination and to denigrate members of social groups we consider to be ‘less’ than ourselves. It can also carry with it the connotation that people cannot change and cannot therefore be agents of social change.

Through this experience, and through continued engagement in cross-disciplinary conversations, I have learned the profound importance of not relying on jargon to communicate what I want to communicate, to listen closely to those who critique my research methods, and to be open to constructive debate and dialogue about the interpretation and meaning of my findings. These practices do not always come easily (or intuitively), but they are critical for any scholar who aims to engage in a productive, innovative, and impactful program of research in the cognitive science of religion.

## **Conclusion**

In Richert and Harris (2008), we set out to unpack the hypothesis that humans are intuitive mind-body dualists, viewing other persons as consisting of two, distinct elements. We found that our concepts of others are more complex than dividing the functions of a person into those performed by the body and those performed by the mind. Our data suggested that an early emerging intuition toward essentializing plays a critical role in how we view the nature of ourselves and other people. In particular, beyond cognitive and biological functions, people seem to associate an individual essence to the self – the soul — that has unique functions (spiritual, emotional) and remains relatively constant, from before birth over the course of a person’s life, and into the afterlife.

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