Episodic Future Thinking in 4-Year-Olds, Poster Symposium: The who, what, where and when of episodic foresight development

Three and Four-year olds’ episodic future thinking skills
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BACKGROUND

What is episodic future thinking?
It is estimated that people spend about a third of their daily lives mentally simulating future scenarios. This ability to project oneself into the future to pre-experience an event is termed episodic future thinking (Atance & O’Neill, 2001).

Key components of episodic future thinking
Research with adults has found that the construction of a novel, complex and coherent scene involves the retrieval and integration of information from the semantic and episodic memory systems (Levine & Spreng, 2006). Context has also been shown to play key part here as people imagine future scenarios using previously stored visuo-spatial dimensions of places (Szpunar, Watson & McDermott, 2007; Arzy et al, 2009).

However, there are only a few studies have investigated this ability in young children (Atance & Meltzoff, 2005; Busby & Suddendorf, 2005ab; Russell, Alexis, & Clayton, 2010; Suddendorf, Nielsen and von Gehen’s (2011). Al confirmed this ability emerges in the 3-5 age range. Perhaps the most refined method so far is utilised by Russell et al (2010). In this task, 3-, 4- and 5-year-olds played a game of blow football on one end of a table (see Figure 1). At the end of the game children were asked to select 2 out of 6 items (see Figure 2) that would enable them to play this game tomorrow from the opposite, unreachable, side of the table (in blue). They conducted four experiments asking 3-5 year olds children the question in three conditions: present-self (control condition), future-self and future-other.

METHOD AND MATERIALS

Aim of Current Research:
The current series of studies aimed at replicating Russell et al (2010) study by using: a) three novel games with similar design; b) include more children for each study (N=24) and c) use higher chance cut-off point - 0.5/0.66. The studies aimed to discover at what age exactly episodic future thinking emerges in pre-school aged children.

Study 1:
Participants: It involved 24, 4-year olds (M=53.6 months)
Conditions: Future-Self (Look) – 2 choices
Study 2:
Participants: It involved 24, 4-year olds (M=53.7 months)
Conditions: Future-Self (Not Look) – 2 choices
Study 3:
Participants: It involved 24, 4-year olds (M=47.3 months)
Conditions: Future-Self (Not Look) – 3 choices (1 distractor)
The order of presentation of each game was counterbalanced.

Outline of the main features of all three tasks:

![Figure 1. Russell and Colleagues’ Blow Football Task](image)

Figure 2. Children choose 2 out of 6 items to use tomorrow

RESULTS:

Four-year-olds’ pass rates (%) for each study at each task – future self condition

Study 1: Children performed significantly above chance for all games: Game 1: p<0.001; Game 2: p=0.001 and Game 3: p=0.001
Study 2: Children performed significantly above chance for all games: Game 1: p=0.007; Game 2: p=0.007 and Game 3: p=0.023
Study 3: Children did not perform significantly above chance for any game: Game 1: p=0.132; Game 2: p=0.182; and Game 3: p=0.192

The fact that Study 3 which involved the use of 3 items (incl. distractor) did not yield significant results suggests that children may not be necessarily choosing the right item by projecting themselves in the future. They may well select it as it is simply new or different. Yet, in Study 3 two children, aged 55 and 56 months did select the right toy irrespective of the presence of the distractor.

![Table 1. Mean number of correct answers across the three games in Experiments 1 and 2](image)

FUTURE DIRECTIONS:

1. The current results appear to suggest that episodic future thinking may be appearing at the later stages of age 4. This is an earlier age to what Russell et al (2010) originally found in their sample.
2. Nevertheless, there remains the possibility that children are selecting the items for tomorrow’s use on the basis of semantic reasoning, perhaps, combined with episodic future thinking.
3. The next step would be to consider a bit more sensitive type of design for all three games so that each game is solely (or mostly) solvable on the basis of mental projecting the self in the future (the next day).

REFERENCES: