"I Believe in Santa Claus, But I Know He's Not Real": The Role of Ambivalence in Belief

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Until my daughter was six years old, she spoke of knowing that Santa Claus was not real: "It's just someone dressed up, isn't it?" But one December evening in 1987, while we sat watching a television movie about Christmas, she made some comments suggesting that she had reassessed her own ideas regarding the physical reality of Santa Claus. Responding to her words, I asked her, "Do you believe Santa Claus is real, or do you know Santa Claus is real?" Without hesitation she answered, "I *know* Santa Claus is real." I remember being surprised at her assertion because it was without reinforcement from us; we do not celebrate Christmas.

More recently I asked my now eight-year-old daughter whether she believes Santa Claus is real or whether she knows Santa Claus is real. She said, "I *believe* Santa Claus is real." I asked her to explain the difference between the two statements. She answered, "If I say, 'I know' that means I am sure, that I've seen it or something. 'I believe,' that means it's possible."[2]

As I will demonstrate in this article, belief is a construct through which people can express a sense of possibility, or perplexity, or personal commitment[3] Even though they may recognize disconfirming evidence, people can also choose to act "as if" they believe (cf. Dandridge 144-146; Opie and Opie 210; and Toelken). Any evaluation falling between the extremes of "probably true" and "possibly untrue" may be characterized as an expression of ambivalence: in short, the co-existence in one person of opposing emotional attitudes about an object, phenomenon or concept.

Ambivalence may be the quintessence of the construct *belief.* Although this inference arises from my analysis of data from individual and group interviews with children,[4] I assume that it also applies to adult conceptions. In the following discussion I will account for some of the reasons people might express ambivalence. It may, for example, result from noticing disconfirming evidence; or it may arise out of an awareness of peer pressure or other social expectations. Finally, I will hypothesize about the ramifications of ambivalence for belief and folklore studies.

First, however, it is important to characterize terms. I use the noun *beliefs* (or *a belief)* to refer to people's actual expres-

sions of belief; i.e. statements or actions which the speaker or actor classifies as belonging to the category, *belief.* Belief, like knowledge, is a construct, specifically a conceptual category. Belief, like knowledge, is a part of normative mental functioning. As cognitive constructs, both belief and knowledge are subject to the same dynamic, emergent forces underlying any and all conceptualization.

But this is not to say that belief and knowledge are indistinguishable. As one twelve-year old girl told me, "Facts you are sure of; a belief some people would be sure of and some people wouldn't." In other words, the children I interviewed generally categorized phenomena or ideas as *belief* not on the basis of topic, but on the basis of two interrelated axes: individual assessment and perception of others' assessments. Although the categories *belief* and *knowledge* rest on the same cognitive functions, to try to use them synonomously, as Black suggests in "Belief Systems" (511), is to ignore an important emic category for speakers of American English. Therefore, I use belief and knowledge as closely analogous constructs representing overlapping classifications; I further assume that an individual's categorization of phenomena or concepts may readily shift between belief and knowledge.

Of course, once we recognize the role of ambivalence it becomes difficult to study belief as if it were a rigid category. As people's doubts are resolved or their questions are answered their conceptual categories may shift. Moreover, when we take ambivalence into account it becomes difficult to study belief as if it were fully represented by isolated propositions, as belief study has so often been approached in the past. Philosophers Quine and Ullian, for example, argue for a direct manner of divining belief or what a person believes: they write, "The criterion is the obvious one: the man assents to the sentence when asked" (5). But how can any person communicate the complex nature of conception simply by assenting or affirming a sentence to be true? Let me illustrate the difficulty of this notion.

At age eight, Simon was one of the youngest children in my study. During my initial conversation with his mother, she told me that she never encouraged her children to believe in things like Santa Claus or the Tooth Fairy. Her older son Lyndon, who also participated in my study, echoed these sentiments. Thus, when Simon first responded "I do not believe" to my written questionnaire items regarding the Tooth Fairy, I hypothesized he was expressing his family's overt consensus about such fantasy figures.

In a subsequent individual interview, however, Simon discussed the Tooth Fairy within the rubric of belief. During our discussion he told me that he had heard about the Tooth Fairy from his mother and his friends. He explained, "You're always asleep when she comes." Then he added, in what sounded like a puzzled tone, "I'm surprised that you don't get waked

up." He continued, "You could put this bell on top of the door, and then it's tied with a siring on top here; and then they open the door and 'm.' And when it goes down to the bottom, it goes 'clang' and you wake up." I asked, "And that would be a good way to find out what?" He answered, "If the Tooth Fairy is the Tooth Fairy."

Simon's statement--"If the Tooth Fairy *is* the Tooth Fairy"--leads to an inference that Simon entertains the possibility, however slight, that the Tooth Fairy has corporeal existence. I further infer that his conception must have included some uncertainty because there is no reason to posit a test for something about which the individual has no doubt.

Although anthropologist Benson Saler also characterizes belief as "a proposition, meaningful to an individual, which the individual affirms to be true" (30), he also acknowledges the useful dimension of uncertainty or doubt. He asks, "In what domains of their meaningful universe do our informants display the greatest toleration for uncertainty? Where the least? What might be the significance of the allocation? And what, indeed, might be the social functions of doubt" (33)? Doubt, as a component of ambivalence, plays a major role in an individual's construct of belief.

Ambivalence may result from noticing disconfirming evidence. As such, ambivalence is an outgrowth of experience in the broadest sense of that word and may be the basis for a child's actively wondering. In this sense, ambivalence, or more properly dissonance, is also an incentive or impetus for seeking information or experience or at least being receptive to new information.

Perhaps ironically, ambivalence may also be the means whereby children can ignore disconfirming evidence. The children I interviewed expressed their uncertainties as they talked about their changing conceptions and the difficulty of squaring those new conceptions with all the information. At times, the children worked arduously and consciously at making new data fit During a group interview, for example, Alice, Gary, Sam and Barbara were discussing things that they "used to believe, but don't now." During a discussion about Santa Claus, Barbara turned to Gary and asked him, "Do you believe in Santa Claus?" He said, "I used to." I asked, "Do you think you still believe a little bit?" He said, "Yeah, I sort of do. A little bit." "Which tiny bit?" I asked. Gary's reply provides an illustration of how he fits "facts," or his concrete experiences, into his changing conception concerning Santa's actual existence. He said, "Well, see, I don't urn think that much that urn that my mom and dad could wrap all those presents in one night Cause they have to go to sleep too."

His older sister Alice interrupted, "I don't think they do it all in one. Sometimes I'll go in their closet months before, and you'll see all these presents wrapped." Gary didn't even look at his sister as he continued, "But see they can't do it when we're at school because Mom works at school,

and then they do errands and stuff." Alice, her words slightly overlapping Gary's, said, "They can do it at night." Gary said, "Dad's at work." In an aside to me, Alice said that she used to tease her brother by saying that Santa was not true. She concluded, "So he had a big belief that it was true, because he wouldn't even believe it when I said it wasn't true."

It may take an enormous amount of disconfirming evidence before paradigms, personal or otherwise, change. This seems to be the state of affairs in the scientific community, as Barnes describes in "Paradigms: Scientific and Social," the members of that profession shoehorn discordant data into existing paradigms until they are moved to change those paradigms because they recognize the growing anomalies or until there is an alternative theory which will serve as a paradigm (100).

Similarly, people do the same with their individual paradigms. In the discussion I quoted above, for example, Gary tries repeatedly to "fit the facts" into his existing conception of Santa Claus, conception which seemed heavily marked by ambivalence. Acknowledging, or at least verbalizing, that Santa is not real, Gary nonetheless wonders how his parents could possibly be responsible for all the presents. He is working very hard to maintain the possibility of Santa Claus' existence in the face of the disconfirming evidence which his sister Alice presents to him. Gary's conceptualization is very much affected by his perception of peers', parents' and other people's assessments of various phenomena and ideas which he might categorize as belief.

I suspect that as children grow older, they learn to reject-verbally, at least-age-inappropriate notions about fantasy figures. This is akin to Gordon Allport's delineation of the stages of prejudice in which the older child verbally accepts but behaviorally rejects other people (292-295). During one interview, for example, one twelve-year-old boy told me privately that he has a lucky penny. He did not want the other children to know, for fear that they would think it was "a little kid thing to do." Expressions of this kind of social awareness illustrate the self-awareness that is part of both conceptualization and the children's own responses to their age-peers and siblings. In other words, there is a strong social dimension to ambivalence.

Other researchers have noticed the ambivalence with which some children discuss fantasy figures. In general these researchers have addressed ambivalence only in terms of the transition between believing and not believing.

In their studies of the developmental progression of children's belief regarding imaginery figures such as Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy and the Easter Bunny, for example, Norman Prentice, Martin Manosevitz and Laura Hubbs categorize a child as being in the transitional stage "when the child was tom between belief and disbelief, presented 'facts' and reasons that

both proved and disproved Santa's existence" (620; see also Blair, McKee and Jernigan). In his dissertation, entitled "On Discovering the Truth: Children's Reactions to the Reality of the Santa Claus Myth," Carl Anderson reports the unexpected finding of the "prevalence and impact of the transitional process from belief to doubt to disbelief' (158).

The notion of the "transitional child" implies that this is a fixed stage through and out of which a child passes. Though that may be a defensible observation of some children, regarding selective specific topics, it fails to address the possibility that ambivalence may not be a discrete stage, but rather a lifelong element of the construct *belief.* As Bern observes, "the consistency theorists. . . have taken the. . . step of postulating that men possess a drive toward cognitive consistency. . .. Inconsistency, they seem to be trying to tell us, motivates belief and attitude change" (34). But not all ambivalence is necessarily perceived as dissonance, as motivation for testing hypotheses. Doubt is not necessarily denial.

For example, during a group session Alice described her personal experiences of first doubting, and then entertaining, the possible efficacy of knocking on wood. She said:

> A couple of years ago, me and my mom were walking along, and we were just talking; and I said like, "I haven't been stung by a bee in two years," and my mom says, "Knock on wood." I go, "I don't believe that" And I'm not kidding, the next day I got stung by a bee. And it's kind of coincidental or it's, it's kind of weird.

I asked Alice, "So would you say it is something that you would believe in now? Like would you knock on wood if someone says, 'nothing bad ever happens to me'?" Alice answered:

> Yeah, I'll knock on wood, but I'm not positive I'll believe it But I still knock on wood. Like last night I was lying in bed just thinking, and I was thinking, I kind of had this weird feeling. I was thinking about dying and stuff, and I said, "I hope I don't die," and I knocked on wood. I had to do it. I was just lying there, and I said, "I don't have to do this." And like ten minutes later I just had to do it."

For Alice it is not simply a matter of "believing" or "not believing," of unquestioning acceptance or rejection of the advice to knock on wood. Her conception seems to include ambivalence, that mixture of doubt and possibility. Lying alone in the night, facing her own anxiety about death, she is receptive to considering the possibility that knocking on wood might be an efficacious practice.

In short, the assumption that there is a fixed sequence--belief to doubt,

doubt to disbelief-does not address belief as being a part of complex, transformational, cognitive processes. It is, rather, an approach that is wedded to assumptions about stages of development for individuals and, by extension, for whole societies.[5] Consider the letter a grown woman left for a shopping mall Santa Claus in California (Thorne 4): "At 50, I get all tingly about Santa." Isn't it possible that ambivalence, or cognitive inconsistency, is a life-long characteristic (cf. Bern 34)?

Without exception, all the children in the second and third cohorts of my study answered my questionnaires by saying, "I know there is no Santa Claus." In fact, when I asked the children during one group session to give me lists of things they "believed" and lists of things they "knew," they chanted as if in a chorus, "I know there is no Santa Claus," "I know there is no Tooth Fairy," "I know there is no Easter Bunny."

During that group session the children also described their gradual or shocking discoveries that there was no Santa Claus. It therefore came as some surprise to me when one participant of that session later told me that she wanted to change some of her questionnaire responses. Mary, who had turned nine during the sequence of interviews, said, "Well, I believe in Santa Claus, but I know that he's not real. So, I'll put 'believe' there .... If I hadn't begged my dad, I would probably still think he was real. I don't know why, I just think he is still real even though I know he's not." I asked if she was sorry that she had begged her dad to tell her. "Yeah," she sighed. "It's funner having an imaginary thing. Even if it's not real it's still fun thinking of things like that."

As part of his characterization of the different stages of belief about organizational symbols and the uses of those stages in organizational research, Thomas Dandridge delineates his notion of stage four belief. Describing how a person who is operating at the fourth stage of belief might react to organizational symbols, Dandridge writes,

> The person now acts only 'as if' he or she believed, because in doing so it is possible to experience closer identification with the organization. . .. Such a person might say, "I know the story isn't true, but it makes me feel good when I hear it. . .." [T]he fourth is the imaginative [stage] (144).

For both Mary and the woman described in the newspaper article, it appears that their willingness, or need, to act "as if' Santa were real is a conscious maintenance of ambivalence. Even though Mary understands the disconfirming evidence, she has constructed a personal assessment that allows her to continue to "believe."

Mary expresses her ambivalence directly. Other children express their ambivalence through stories or through verbalized musings that at first

glance may appear to contain logical inconsistencies, but which I think actually illustrate this "push-pull" attribute of opposing emotional feelings. Furthermore, ambivalence may be a dominant feature in younger children's accounts because they have not yet learned to *deny* their hope or desire that such fantasy figures exist; older children, on the other hand, may not express ambivalence even if they feel it, perhaps because they are aware of the strong social assessment regarding age-appropriate behavior. Finally, it is likely that even young children entertain doubts while simultaneously expressing what sounds like certainty or denial. As one of the older children in my study commented, "I'll bet even little kids aren't 100% positive about the Tooth Fairy."

What accounts for this ambivalence? As a fundamental human characteristic, the ability to entertain ambivalence may be related to the ability and the need to be able to deal with uncertainty. Ambivalence may be the result or the perception that some notions are untestable. For example, Robert A. Georges hypothesizes that legends are the "metaphorizations of basic kinds of relationships sets in which one or both parts or the nature of the relationship that is conceived to exist between these parts is incapable of being tested to the satisfaction of every man" (18). I wish to illustrate this point in my last example, where I briefly characterize my observation and interviews with four children regarding their experiments with calling "Bloody Mary."[6]

As Sam, Alice, Gary, Barbara and I sat discussing the kinds of ideas the children might call *belief,* Barbara related: "If you say at twelve o'clock, if you say, if you stare into the mirror and it's dark and you say 'Bloody Murder' one hundred times, someone, a lady will come out and chop your head off." The children argued among themselves, discussing just how this was done. They finally decided to try calling Bloody Mary that night at a sleepover. Although I was not present at the sleepover itself, I did return later to talk with the children about their attempt.

Alice reported that they had indeed tried calling "Bloody Mary" the night of the sleepover. She said, "Gary and Barbara ran out of the room when we turned out the light. But we just couldn't do it." I asked with great interest why they decided not to do it. "We just started freaking out with the lights out," Alice replied. "It was freaky. Not totally scary like falling from the rock you are climbing. . . but I thought of what would happen *ifit were true"* (emphasis added). I asked her, "So did you think maybe it was true, definitely it was true, or completely wasn't true?" She quickly answered, "Wasn't true. But we were still freaky. . .. Sam got up to thirty by himself. He wouldn't go up to 100." Alice reported in laughter that she had left at the count of two.

When I spoke to Sam two weeks later, I asked him if he had tried "Bloody Mary" during the sleepover. Significantly, he gave a somewhat

ambiguous answer: "Well, just sort of, because you're supposed to say it a hundred times." Perhaps he felt he had not made a full attempt, since by Alice's reporting he said it only thirty times. "Well, we just said it a couple times and then we got too scared," he said, laughing a bit (perhaps nervously). 1 asked if they had made the room dark. "Yeah," he replied. "There's these big mirrors on the wall, and so we, uh, [shudder] too scary." He added that he had tried it alone, then with Alice and Barbara; Gary did not want to try at all. "What made you scared to do it?" 1 asked. Sam replied, "I don't know, just the fact that it *might be true"* (emphasis added). Then he laughed.

Perhaps children entertain the *possibility* that "it might be true" because the stakes for a full test are so high. Who wants to go up to one hundred and risk head-chopping? As Michael Owen Jones, observes, "Most of us in daily life have occasion to operate in terms of metaphors and by means of untested, inadequately tested or untestable hypotheses" (3). Ambivalence is an outcome of living with untested hypotheses. If beliefs can be thought of as hypotheses, then there may be something In the nature of an untested-or at least as yet not disproved-hypothesis that perhaps contributes to people's expressive continuities through time and space that we study as folklore (cf. Georges 18).

Finally, as 1 have argued, the construct of *belief* often rests on an individual's recognition of her lack of personal certainty or a lack of social consensus. Ambivalence is a significant characteristic of this construct, *belief;* as such it may be inferred from people's discussions of their sense of the possibility or uncertainty with which they assess various phenomena or ideas. Ambivalence is an outcome of experience, of noticing evidence, of living in a social environment. Ambivalence is not part of a fixed sequence in an individual's life. The recognition that ambivalence is an integral component of belief may help us understand why speakers of American English do not use the category of *belief* as a synonym for that of *knowledge.*

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Notes

1. I read a slightly shorter version of this paper at the American Folklore Society Meeting in Philadelphia, October 21, 1989.

2. Quoted with permission.

3. I want to acknowledge the contribution Prof. Michael Owen Jones has had on my thinking and writing about the issues discussed in this paper.

4. My data and analysis derive from my dissertation research with elementary school-age children, Topanga, California, 1985-1986. All names are pseudo nyms.

5. See, for example, Erving Goffman, Interaction Ritual (Chicago: Aldine, 1967) 179, who equates ambivalence with the decline of belief.

6. Stories about Bloody Mary--also known as Bloody Murder, Mary Whales and Mary Worth--are widely reported. See, for example, Jan Harold Brunvand, The Mexican Pet: More "New" Urban Legends and Some Old Favorites (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1986) 81; Simon Bronner, ed., American Children's Folklore (Little Rock: August House, 1988) 168-169; Bengt af Klintberg, "Black Madame, Come Out!" Scandinavian Yearbook of Folklore 44 (1988): 155-167; Mary Knapp and Herbert Knapp One Potato. Two Potato: The Secret Education of American Children (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1976) 241-242; and Janet Langlois, "'Mary Whales, I Believe in You, '" Indiana Folklore: A Reader, ed. Linda Degh (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980) 196-224.

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