EXPERIENCE, COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT AND CHILDREN'S CONCEPTS OF HEALTH AND ILLNESS

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Children, as young as four-years-old begin to assign causes to a variety of life events. At first these ideas are primitive, even magical; however, as a child matures, explanations become increasingly complex. There is limited information on children's understanding of health and illness, most specifically what they understand about causes of illness. Children try to find a logic to their physical ailments, what makes them sick or keeps them well.

There are two questions of importance: 1) what is the relationship between a child’s age and a causal explanation of illness (reflecting cognitive stage development)? and 2) what is the relationship between a personal illness experience and the stated causal explanation of illness? This study included 92 children between the ages of 4 and 11; 47 were healthy, and 45 had a recent hospitalization (1-8 days). A structured interview based on a Piagetian framework was used to organize subjects’ responses. Scoring criteria were used to categorize concepts in one of three categories of causal explanation.

Findings indicated that concepts related to illness cause followed developmental trends with statistically distinct developmental causal categories, Pre-logical, Concrete Logical and Formal Logical. There was a strong, significant relationship between age and category. Chronological age was the most important factor when predicting and classifying subjects into the three categories. Personal illness experience (hospitalization) alone did not have any significant influence on a child’s understanding of illness causation. Additional findings indicated that children often identified illness experiences among family and friends with greater frequency than their parents.

The developmental framework consisting of seven distinct causal categories (Bibace & Walsh, 1980).

**Pre-logical** explanations were classified as:
(a) Incomprehension--children avoided questions or gave irrelevant answers;
(b) Phenomenism--the cause of illness was attributed to an external concrete event occurring simultaneously with the illness but spatially and temporally remote; and
(c) Contagion--the cause of the illness was located in people or things near but not touching the child.

**Concrete Logical** explanations included:
(a) Contamination--the cause of illness was in some way identified as "bad" and required physical contact for transmission; and
(b) Internalization--the cause of illness was found to be inside the body, most likely ingested or inhaled.

**Formal Logical** explanations consisted of two categories:
(a) Physiological--the cause of illness was due to malfunction of specific body organs with the process or sequence of events clearly identified; and
(b) Psychophysiological--incorporation of both physiologic and psychological causes of an illness.