

Childhood Misconceptions

Like many children, I believed in Santa. I moved in with my dad's parents when my parents got divorced, and my earliest memories of Christmas were at my grandparent's house. My grandma would mail my letters to Santa in October and we would leave out milk and cookies that were always gone Christmas morning...I was thoroughly convinced a large, velvet-clad, bearded man wiggled down the chimney to deliver my presents. I originally held this misconception because my family and community actively promoted it. I grew up going to Catholic school (Christmas stories were ingrained in our beliefs) and had only every known other children who also believed in Santa, so the world I knew supported the misconception.

Every Christmas there were nametags on the presents: some were from my dad, some from my grandma and grandpa, and some from Santa. On my seventh or eighth Christmas, as I was opening my gifts, I realized that the handwriting on the nametags was the same for my grandparents and Santa. I think I noticed this because we had been living with my grandparents for a few years and I had become very familiar with my grandma's chicken-scratch handwriting. I felt uneasy, but was more focused on the gifts themselves to say anything. I was in a state of disequilibrium because the two schemes I had created, one of Santa and one of my grandma's handwriting, could not possibly fit into the same scheme (my private speech consisted of the unbelievable question, *Grandma is Santa?*).

Later in the day as the excitement of the morning began to wear off, I asked my grandma why her handwriting and Santa's was the same. She gently told me Santa did not exist and that the letters, cookies, and nametags were all just to convince us he did. She also told me that the gifts labeled 'Santa' had always come from her and my grandpa and that she would use the list she supposedly mailed to Santa to see which gifts we really wanted. My adaptation of this information was, as I remember it, quite smooth. I was upset, of course, but I was able to accommodate my understanding of how and why I receive gifts on Christmas once I changed the existing scheme in which that Santa gave presents to good children—presents were a

tradition and my behavior throughout the year still affected what I did and did not receive, so in order to accommodate the new information I simply had to discard the scheme of Santa-as-real. Although I did not find “How People Learn” by Donovan, Bransford, and Pellegrino (1999) particularly useful in dealing with this specific misconception, I did remember the claim that a “strong base of factual knowledge” is needed for mastery in a subject (p. 19). In accommodating my new understanding that Santa did not exist, the “fact” of receiving gifts on Christmas morning was unchanged; in other words, my understanding of *Christmas* did not need to be altered. In this way, my misconception did not detract from any knowledge I had accrued and did not inhibit my “mastery” of anything.

My Santa misconception can be understood using Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory because the tradition of Santa exists in a “cultural setting” and “cannot be understood apart from the setting” (Woolfolk, Winne, and Perry, 2015, p. 30). Furthermore, I was able to use the physical tools (handwriting) and psychological tools (comparison) I had been building to see that something was wrong with my current scheme. I had “appropriated...the ways of acting and thinking provided by [my] culture” (Woolfolk, Winne, and Perry, 2015, p. 32). At an early age I learned that nobody’s handwriting is exactly the same and that the Easter Bunny did not exist, both social conceptions that I had learned through interactions. I internalized this information during a “sensitive period” in which I was responsive to all the factors in the Santa situation (Woolfolk, Winne, and Perry, 2015, p. 5). In keeping with Vygotsky’s notion that children benefit from interactions with adults (as opposed to Piaget’s notion that peer to peer learning is most valuable), I think that it was easy to adjust back to equilibrium because the new information came from my grandmother who had my full trust and admiration. If another child told me that Santa did not exist and if I not seen the evidence that had led me to the conclusion on my own, I would have been reluctant to take the interaction seriously and adjust my scheme to suit the new information.