

Beliefs about the soul and afterlife that we acquire as children stick with us, whether we know it or not

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The Rutgers researcher asked 348 undergraduate psychology students about their beliefs concerning the soul and afterlife when they were 10 years old, and now.

What we believed as children about the soul and the afterlife shapes what we believe as adults – regardless of what we say we believe now,

according to a new Rutgers study.

"My starting point was, assuming that people have these automatic – that is, implicit or ingrained – beliefs about the soul and afterlife, how can we measure those implicit beliefs?," said Stephanie Anglin, a [doctoral student](#) in psychology in Rutgers' School of Arts and Sciences.

Her research, "On the Nature of Implicit Soul Beliefs: When the Past Weighs More Than the Present," appears in latest issue of the *British Journal of Social Psychology*.

Anglin asked 348 undergraduate psychology students about their beliefs concerning the soul and afterlife when they were 10 years old, and now. (The mean age of the students was just over 18.) Their answers gave her the students' explicit beliefs – that is, what the students said they believed now, and what they remembered believing when they were 10.

Anglin found that her subjects' implicit beliefs about the soul and the afterlife were close to what they remembered as their childhood beliefs. But those implicit beliefs were often very different from their explicit beliefs – what they said they believed now.

She compared implicit belief by religious affiliation, including believers and non-believers, and found no difference between them. "That suggests that implicit beliefs are equally strong among religious and non-religious people," she said.

The result did not surprise Anglin. She was aware of an experiment reported *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* in 2009 in which researchers asked people to sign a contract selling their souls to the experimenter for \$2. "Almost nobody signed, even though the researchers told them it wasn't actually a contract and would be shredded right away," she said.

Anglin used a well-known statistical tool, the Implicit Association Test, to gauge subjects' implicit beliefs about the soul and afterlife. In that test, each subject sees two concept words paired on the top of his or her computer screen – in this case, "soul" paired either with "real" or "fake" to gauge his or her beliefs about the soul; "soul" paired either with "eternal" or "death" to address beliefs about the afterlife. A series of words is then flashed on the screen, and the subject must indicate by pressing a key whether each word fits with the two words on top.

"For example, if you had 'soul' and 'fake' on your screen, words like 'false' or 'artificial' would fit into that category, but words like 'existing' or 'true' would not," Anglin said.

Anglin concedes that there are limitations to her research, but suggests those limitations provide avenues for future research. She examined her subjects' implicit and explicit beliefs only about the soul and afterlife, and not about the relationship of those beliefs with beliefs about social or political issues. And she had to rely on her subjects' memories of what they believed when they were children.

"It would be really useful to have a longitudinal study examining the same ideas," Anglin said. "That is, study a group of people over time, from childhood through adulthood, and examine their [beliefs](#) about the soul and afterlife as they develop."

More information: *British Journal of Social Psychology*, onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/1099-8309/earlyview

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