Core folkbiological concepts:

New evidence from Wichí children and adults

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Abstract

We examine two core folk-biological concepts (e.g., ANIMATE, LIVING THING\(^1\)) in adults and children from the Wichí community, an indigenous group of Amerindians living in the Chaco forest in north Argentina. We provide an overview of the Wichí community, describing in brief their interaction with objects and events in the natural world, and the naming systems they use to describe key folkbiological concepts. We then report the results of two behavioral studies, each designed to deepen our understanding of the acquisition of the fundamental folkbiological concepts ANIMATE and LIVING THING in Wichí adults and children. These results converge well with evidence from other communities. Wichí children and adults appreciate these fundamental concepts; both are strongly aligned with the Wichí community-wide belief systems. This work underscores the importance of considering cultural and linguistic factors in studying the acquisition of fundamental concepts about the biological world.

Key words: folkbiology, concepts, development, language, Amerindian community, Wichí

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\(^1\) Small capital letters denote concepts; quotation marks denote their names; italics denote language-specific names.
In recent years, considerable research attention has been devoted to the study of ‘folkbiology’, or how people in communities across the world conceptualize and reason about the natural world. Adopting a developmental and cross-cultural approach, researchers have sought to identify which concepts (if any) are represented universally and whether and how they are shaped by experience. There is a growing consensus that some fundamental folkbiological concepts, which appear early in development, may also be represented universally. The concept ANIMATE OBJECT serves a strong case-in-point. Infants’ sensitivity to a distinction between animate and inanimate objects is evident within the first six months of life (Berthenthal, 1993; R. Gelman, Durgin, & Kaufman, 1995; Johnson, Slaughter, & Carey, 1998; Kuhlmeir, Bloom & Wynn, 2004; Poulin-Dubois & Shultz, 1990; Opfer, 2002; Woodward, 1999; Woodward, Phillips, and Spelke, 1993), and this distinction guides their expectations about the behaviors of objects throughout childhood (Booth, Waxman & Huang, 2005; R. Gelman, 1990; S. Gelman & Gottfried, 1996; R. Gelman, Spelke, & Meck, 1983; Jipson & Gelman, 2007; Keil, 1979; 1989; Opfer & S. Gelman, 2001).

In contrast, other fundamental folkbiological concepts appear to emerge more slowly in development and seem to be strongly influenced by the linguistic and cultural communities in which children are raised. The overarching concept LIVING THING, which includes both the plant and animal kingdoms, appears to follow this trajectory (Carey, 1985; Hatano & Inagaki, 1999, 1994; Inagaki & Hatano, 1996; Leddon, Waxman & Meddin, 2008; Nguyen & Gelman, 2002; Nguyen & Rosengren, 2004; Opfer & Siegler, 2004; Piaget, 1929; Poling & Evans, 2004; Slaughter, Jaakkola, & Carey, 1999; Slaughter & Lyons, 2003; Springer & Keil, 1989, 1991; Waxman, 2005). Evidence from children across diverse linguistic and cultural communities reveals that the incorporation of plants (along with animals) into the overarching concept LIVING THING is a protracted developmental achievement (Anggoro, Waxman, & Medin, 2008; Hatano, Siegler, Richards, Inagaki, Stavy, & Wax, 1989, 1993).
and one that is strongly inflected by children’s experience. Three types of experience have been implicated, including a) language practices (e.g., whether and how key folkbiological concepts are marked in the native language (Anggoro, Waxman, & Medin, 2008;), b) contact with the natural world (e.g., the amount and kind of direct interaction with the biological environment (Atran, Medin, Lynch, Vapnarsky, UcanEk’, & Sousa, 2001; Proffitt, Coley, & Medin, 2000; Ross, Medin, Coley, & Atran, 2003; Tarlowski, 2006), and c) community-wide belief systems about the natural world (e.g., the range of entities that are considered to be LIVING THINGS (Astuti, Solomon, & Carey, 2004; Atran & Medin, 2008; Bang, Medin, &Atran,2007; Medin, Ross, Atran, Cox, Coley, Proffitt, & Blok, 2006; Waxman & Medin, 2006;Waxman, Medin, & Ross, 2007). For example, some (but not all) communities, certain natural kinds (e.g., sun, other heavenly bodies, and rocks) are considered LIVING THINGS.

Taken together, then, recent research suggests that although some fundamental folkbiological concepts are acquired early and may be represented universally, others are acquired later and are shaped in important ways by children’s experiences in the communities where they are raised. However, key questions remain concerning how peoples’ appreciation of the overarching concept LIVING THING is shaped by the naming practices, language, experiences and belief systems.

Our goal in the research we present here is to pursue these questions by offering new evidence from the Wichí, an indigenous Amerindian community living in the Chaco forest north of Argentina2. Descriptions of this population have been reported in the linguistics and anthropological literatures, but to the best of our knowledge, the current project represents the first investigation of the Wichí community from a psychological and developmental perspective.

We focus on the Wichí because they offer us an opportunity to consider the

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2 In addition to north Argentina the Wichí people are located in Tarija, Bolivia.
acquisition of fundamental biological concepts within a strong native language-speaking community with a constellation of experiences and belief systems that differs in important ways from the ones held by participants in most prior empirical work. First, unlike in the majority of the Amerindian populations studied to date, the Wichí language is very much alive. As the primary language within the family and the community as a whole, Wichí is acquired naturally and spontaneously by infants and young children. Second, for children as well as adults, daily life in the Wichí community involves extensive and varied direct contact with plants, animals and natural inanimates. Third, as we shall see, Wichí belief systems pertaining to the natural world appear distinctive.

In what follows, we provide an overview of the Wichí community, describing in brief their contact with and beliefs about the natural world and the naming systems that they use to describe key folkbiological concepts. Whenever possible, we supplement the existing evidence with insights from native adult informants from our target community. Armed with this descriptive information, we go on to report the results of two empirical studies, each designed to deepen our understanding of the acquisition of a the fundamental folkbiological concepts animate and living thing in Wichí adults and children.

Descriptive information

The Wichí people, formerly known as the “Mataco”, are an indigenous population living in the Chaco forest in the South American Lowlands of Argentina. The Chaco forest spans 1,000,000 square kilometers; its terrain is characterized primarily by grassy plains, interspersed with distinct areas dominated by scrub growth, small woody plants, or palm groves. The Wichí depend economically on traditional activities, including hunting, fishing, gathering, and seasonal “slash-and-burn” horticultural practices. Textile weaving, pottery, and, to a lesser extent, ranching and farming are also key economic practices.

The nutritional, symbolic, economic, medicinal uses and significance of both plants
and animals in the Wichí community is well-documented (e.g. Alvarsson 1988; Arenas, 2003; Arenas & Giberti, 1993; Koschitsky, 1992; Maranta, 1987; Palmer, 1995, 2005; Suárez, 2009; 2010, 2011a y 2011b; Suárez & Montani, 2010; Wilbert & Somoneau, 1982). Both women and men are engaged directly with plants and animals, but their activities reflect a strongly gender-based differentiation of labor and expertise. Men are responsible for hunting, fishing, horticulture, and manufacturing wooden handicrafts. Women are responsible for housework, child-rearing, and manufacturing textile handicrafts. Women are also responsible for gathering fruit, wood and other plants, a task that typically requires full-day expeditions deep into the Chaco forest, in which they are accompanied by their children.

The Wichí peoples’ beliefs about relations among entities in the natural world differ from those in most Western, technologically-saturated communities, but bear strong commonalities with the beliefs held in several other native Amerindian communities (see Wilbert and Simoneau, 1982; Palmer, 2005; and Braunstein, 1983 for more extensive descriptions). We focus here on only two beliefs. First, in the Wichí tradition, humans descend from non-human animals; this origin story reveals a close affinity between human and non-human animals. Second, in addition to the plant and animal kingdoms, the Wichí recognize other kind of world beings or spirits (in Wichí, ‘ahot’³) whose members interact permanently with the natural world.

The Wichí language

In sharp contrast with many Amerindian communities studied to date, the Wichí language (Wichi-Lhamtes, or ‘the words of the people’) is the first language in the family and primary language in the community. Wichí is classified as a member of the Mataco-Mataguayan language family (Tovar, 1964). Several distinct regional dialects have been reported. Taken together, there are approximately 40,000 native speakers of Wichí in

³ The terms ahot and wichí also refer to opposite dimensions: ahot represents the danger and the damage and wichí the vitality and prosperity (See, Braustein, 1983; Bártia, 2007 for a extensive treatment about the relation between the Wichí people and the spiritual world)
Argentina and Bolivia. Nonetheless, because Wichí is considered an endangered language, language documentation is currently underway (Golluscio, 1993; Terraza, 2009; Vidal & Nercesian, 2005, 2009).

In this paper, we focus on the Wichí population living at Laguna Yema, Formosa, Argentina, where the dialect known as del Teuco o Bermejo is spoken (Gerzenstein, 2003). Beginning at roughly six years of age, all children from Laguna Yema are enrolled in a public school (The Wichí Lako School Number 421); the students in this school are exclusively native-speaking Wichí children from our target community. Although instruction is considered to be bilingual and although Spanish is introduced gradually for some subject areas, children are not fluent, and their use of Spanish is restricted to certain classroom settings.

*Wichí names for fundamental concepts relative to the natural world*

Although documentation of the Wichí language is currently underway (e.g. Golluscio, 1993; Terraza, 2009; Vidal & Nercesian, 2005, 2009), there is already intriguing evidence about the linguistic devices that mark the key folkbiological concepts. In this section, we describe the Wichí naming practices associated with these concepts. Whenever necessary, we supplement the existing evidence gathered on speakers of other dialects, with additional information that we have gleaned from interviews with native-speaking adults from Laguna Yema.

*LIVING THINGS.* The Wichí language, like English, Spanish, and other languages, includes no single dedicated noun to refer to all entities that are alive, that is to all LIVING THINGS. The phrasal description *hunhat lheley* - translated as ‘inhabitants of earth’ - appears to be close in meaning to English’s LIVING THING. It can be applied to all humans, non-human animals and plants. But in addition, *hunhat lheley* can also be applied to a broader range of

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4 This school is attended only by children and adolescents of this ethnic group and this institution is under the direction of the Intercultural Bilingual Education program implemented in 1984 in Argentina.
entities, including spiritual beings (Vidal, personal communication) (See Figure 1).

Interestingly, although there appears to be no dedicated noun referring to LIVING THING, there are other linguistic devices whose use is restricted to entities with life status. For example, several verbs (e.g., \textit{i}loy (to live; to be alive) \textit{y}ilh (to die) are applied to all and only inhabitants of earth (that is, to all and only living beings).

\textit{Humans}. The noun \textit{hin}’u\textit{lh} refers to people, but is rarely used by either adults or children (Taverna, Waxman, Medin & Peralta, in prep.). Instead, humans are described either as \textit{wichí} (applied to \textit{Wichí} people), \textit{siwele} (applied to \textit{criollos} or white people) or named with a number of other nouns that are used to describe people of other ethnic groups (e.g. \textit{Nivaklé}).

\textit{Non-human animals}. In addition to naming distinct kinds of animals, \textit{Wichí} also includes names for several more inclusive categories, each organized around characteristic animal habitats: \textit{tshotoy} (animals of the forest), \textit{tshotoy inot lheley} (animals of the water), and \textit{tshotoy wiy’ohen} (animals that fly).

One question that remains unclear from the documentation available to date is whether \textit{Wichí} also includes a dedicated name that encompasses all non-human animals. To address this question, we conducted detailed interviews with seven native-speaking adults from our target community, all of whom were teachers in the native school and therefore fluent in Spanish as a second language. The interviews were conducted in Spanish (the native language of the first author). We first asked whether the term \textit{tshotoy} could be applied to all non-human animals. All informants ultimately but hesitantly accepted the possibility that it could be used in this way, but did so only after much deliberation. This suggests that this application of \textit{tshotoy} is certainly not a preferred use. We then asked whether \textit{tshotoy} could,
also be applied to both humans and non-human animals (that is, to all animate beings). All seven informants rejected this possibility, and did so with little hesitation.

Next, because we know that children’s interpretations do not necessarily match perfectly those of adults (Leddon, Waxman & Medin, 2008), we interviewed 33 native Wichí-speaking children, ranging from 5 to 10 years of age ($M = 7.8$; 18 girls; 17 boys). Each child was interviewed individually in Wichí by a native school teacher, in collaboration with the first author. The task was simple. Following Angorro et al. (2008) task, the teacher presented a photograph of a human and asked “Could this be called an animal?” Children’s responses were quite clear. None responded in the affirmative. This, taken together with adults’ responses, strongly suggests that Wichí includes no dedicated noun that refers to both humans and non-human animals. Instead, as is the case in Indonesian, the concept ANIMATE OBJECT remains unnamed (Angorro, et al., 2008; see Berlin, 1992 for other examples of covert or unnamed categories).

**Plants.** In all the documentation to date on Wichí, there is no evidence for a dedicated noun that encompasses the entire plant kingdom. In addition to naming distinct kinds of plants, Wichí includes several higher-order categories (commonly called “life forms” in ethnobiology): hal’o (wild trees and shrubs with woody trunks that inhabit the forest); tokos or n’kos, (both used to refer to cultivated plants); hup-hep (grasses), tusk’al (vaines and rattans), and ithan-lhiley (cactus)(see Suárez, 2009, 2010, 2011a; 2011b, for detailed documentation of the species included in each category).

**Spiritual beings.** Wichí includes a term -ahot- to refer to spiritual beings or entities that are believed to coexist with the Wichí

**Remaining questions.** The existing documentation of the Wichí language, supplemented with our interviews, offers intriguing insights into the naming practices for natural entities. At the same time, however, issues pertaining to two fundamental
folkbiological concepts—ANIMATE and LIVING THING—remained unclear. We designed Studies 1 and 2 to delve more deeply into these concepts in Wichí children and adults, building upon experimental tasks that have been productive in several other distinct cultural and linguistic communities (Angorro, et.al, 2008; Leddon, et al., 2008; Stavy & Wax, 1989; Waxman & Medin, 2006).

**Study 1. Evidence for the ANIMATE concept in Wichí children and adults.**

Our analysis of Wichí naming practices uncovered no evidence of a dedicated name for ANIMATE. Importantly, however, another word, husek (N), came up repeatedly in documentations and spontaneously in discussions with our consultants about the natural world. Roughly translated as “soul”\(^5\), husek refers to a concept that is fundamental to the Wichí belief system. The importance of husek and its implications for the social and moral spheres of the Wichí world are well documented (e.g., Palmer, 2005; Barúa, 2007).

A central issue is which living entities are believed to be ‘owners’ of husek. Several distinct extensions of this term have been noted. According to Palmer (2005), in its primary sense, husek is attributed to animate or social beings (including humans, non-human animals, and ahot), but not to members of the plant kingdom\(^6\). This primary sense, which invokes notions of intentionality, will and conscience (or ‘social will’), is well-aligned with the concept ANIMATE.

In addition, husek appears to have another extension, and one that takes a broader scope. Used in this sense, husek is applied not only to humans and non-human animals, but also to plants. This secondary sense of husek, then, is aligned with LIVING THING. In Palmer’s view (2005), this secondary sense invokes a notion of vitality (or ‘vital will’) which is very

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\(^5\) Native-speakers from our target community agreed with the translation of husek as soul. However, Palmer (2005) translates husek as “will” to avoid confusing the Wichí term with Western notions of soul.

\(^6\) There is some evidence suggesting the extension of husek to certain species of plants with magical properties (see Sudrez and Montani, 2010 for a discussion).
The goal of Study 1 was to delve deeper into Wichí-speakers’ interpretations of *husek*. We were guided by two motivations. First, we sought evidence on how this term is used in our target community, a community that uses a dialect distinct from that in published investigations (e.g. Palmer, 2005; Suárez & Montani, 2010). Second, we were intrigued by the apparent polysemy of this term. In particular, the two extensions, one referring to all living things and another to animate objects only, piqued our curiosity. We noticed that this kind of polysemy, involving nested concepts related to ANIMACY, is not unique to Wichí. Notice, for example, that English, and Spanish as well, include two sense of *animal*: \( \text{ANIMAL}_{\text{inclusive}} \) (which includes humans and non-human animals) and \( \text{ANIMAL}_{\text{contrastive}} \) (which includes only non-human animals, excluding humans). There is evidence that nested meanings like this have interesting consequences on our construal of the relation among humans, non-human animals and even plants (Angorro, et.al, 2008; Angorro, Medin and Waxman, 2010; Waxman, 2005; Leddon, et.al, 2008).

**Participants.** Participants were 17 native Wichí-speaking adults (13 women; 4 men), ranging from 15 to 52 years of age \( M=29.3 \). Although most had learned some Spanish as a second language, they converse almost exclusively in Wichí. Participants were interviewed individually in their homes. Interviews were conducted exclusively in Wichí by a native teacher, in collaboration with the first author.

**Materials.** We developed a set of 10 cards, each with a color photograph of a single entity. Items were chosen to cover the range of living and non-living categories plants, animals, and non-living objects (See Table 1).

**Procedure.** The teacher/researcher explained that we were interested in learning about

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7 In addition to these two senses, *husek* appears to have a third sense, the shamanistic will, which is applied only to a person who becomes a shaman. However, this sense was never brought up by our consultants.

8 Since village life during the day is marked by the divisions of labor according to sex, women are the ones who are at home so were more available for testing.
the meaning of *husek*. To begin, she simply asked, “What does *husek* mean for you?” Next, to understand more precisely the extension of this term, she presented each of the 10 photographs, one at the time in random order, and asked participants to name the depicted entity and to identify whether or not it has *husek*. Participants were encouraged to discuss their reasoning throughout the task.

Scoring: Responses to each photograph were scored as 1 (yes) or 0 (no). We tabulated participants’ responses to ascertain the range of entities to which they attributed *husek*.

Results

Results were straightforward. All participants knew the term *husek*, noting that it refers to a soul or a kind of spiritual entity. Most of them attributed *husek* only to humans and non-human animals, and denied that it could be attributed to plants, natural kinds and artifacts. This suggests that within our target community, *husek* is extended to animals and humans being indeed aligned with ANIMACY\(^9\). These results mirror the primary meaning of *husek* (social will) in the documentations published to date (Palmer, 2005). This strong pattern of interpretation was evident not only in adults’ yes/no responses, but also in their justifications. Most of the adults’ spontaneously discussed characteristics (e.g., autonomous motion, goal-directed behavior) that highlight the distinction between humans and non-human animals on the one hand, and plants on the other. Notice that these same characteristics figure largely in infants’ and English-speaking children’s ANIMATE concept (e.g. Berthenthal, 1993; R. Gelman, 1990; S. Gelman& Gottfried, 1996; Opfer & S. Gelman, 2001). Thus, although *Wichí* speakers have no dedicated name for ANIMATE OBJECT, their attribution of *husek* reveals their sensitivity to this fundamental concept.

\(^9\) It is stated that the term *husek* also can be extended to other animates entities such as *ahot* (supernatural spirits). Our informants agreed with this extension of the term; however in this study we primarily focused on natural entities.
Study 2. Evidence for LIVING THING and ANIMATE in Wichí children and adults

The goal of Study 2 was to consider the developmental trajectory underlying the concepts of LIVING THING, and ANIMATE in Wichí-speaking children and adults. At issue is whether, and at what developmental point, Wichí individuals come to include plants along with humans and non-human animals as constituents of the fundamental concept LIVING THING. We considered two alternatives. On the one hand, because plants have such strong cultural and spiritual significance in the Wichí community and because children and adults have such extensive experience gathering and working with plants, perhaps the Wichí will include plants (along with human and non-human animals) as LIVING THINGS relatively early in development, as compared to their counterparts in, for example, the United States and Jakarta, Indonesia. On the other hand, because the ANIMATE concept is so salient in this community (in husek, in the origin story), perhaps Wichí children, like their US and Indonesian counterparts, will only gradually come to grant plants status as LIVING THINGS.

To address this question, we built upon a sorting task designed by Medin, Waxman and their colleagues (Angorro, Waxman & Medin, 2008; Leddon, Waxman & Medin, 2008) to tap into this overarching concept in young children and in adults from a range of cultures. The procedure involves bringing attention to some property or basis of classification and then asking informants to sort the cards according to whether or not they have this property. In the present case we asked individuals to sort the cards twice, once to identify which were “alive” (iloy), and then to identify which could “die” (yilh). Responses to this task provide insight into the scope of their concept LIVING THING.

Method

Participants: A total of 59 Wichí-speaking individuals participated: 16 5-year-olds (mean age = 5.6); 13 7-year-olds (mean age = 7.0), 16 10-year-olds (mean age = 10.3), and 14
adults (ranging from 18 to 40 years of age (mean age = 29.3)\textsuperscript{10}. All the children attended the 
\textit{Wichí} \textit{Lako} School 421, where they were interviewed individually in a quiet room. Adults 
were interviewed their homes. All interviews were conducted exclusively in \textit{Wichí} by a 
native teacher, in collaboration with the first author.

\textit{Materials.} With the assistance of native teachers, we developed a set of 16 cards, each 
depicting a color photograph of a single living or not living entity familiar to the \textit{Wichí} (Table 
2).

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\caption{Table 2 about here}
\end{table}

\textit{Procedure.} To begin, the teacher/researcher and participant named the entity depicted on 
each card. The researcher then shuffled the cards and initiated the sorting task by presenting 
the cards one at a time. Participants were asked to “put the ones that are “alive” here 
(indicating one side of the table) and “the ones that are not “alive” here” (indicating the other 
side of the table). Once this initial sort was completed, the experimenter re-shuffled the cards 
and asked the participant to sort them again, this time on the basis of the predicate “die” (e.g., 
“put the ones that can “die” here, and the ones that do not “die” here”). Because each of these 
subtasks taps into a property of all living things, we reasoned that performance on this sorting 
task would reflect the content of this concept.

\textit{Scoring:} For each sort, the experimenter took note of the participant’s responses (1 for 
‘yes’; 0 for ‘no’). We tabulated participant’s responses to ascertain the range of entities that 
they included when sorting on the basis of “alive” and “die”. For each sort, we then 
calculated each participant’s mean response for the People, Animal, Plant, Natural-kind and 
Artifact targets.

\textbf{Results}

\textsuperscript{10} All adults, and most of the children, also participated in Experiment 1, three weeks earlier: 10 at age 5; 
11at age 7; 12 at age 10.
The results were striking and revealed strong convergences across language and cultural communities in children’s interpretations of “alive” and “die”. *Wichí* children’s and adults’ appreciation of the overarching LIVING THING concept is evident in their performance when sorting on basis of *die*. But when sorting on the basis of *alive*, both children and adults exhibited a different pattern, one that includes humans and non-human animals (but not plants) and that is aligned with ANIMATE.

For each sort we conducted an analysis of variance (ANOVA) using category (5: people, animal, plant, natural-kind, artifacts) as a within-participants factor, age (3: 5 years, 7 years, 10 years, adults) as a between-participants factor, and participant’s responses as a dependent variable.

**ALIVE.** The ANOVA revealed a main effect for category $F(4, 54) = 162.4 p< .001$. There were no other main effects or interactions. Participants at all ages were more likely to attribute life status to people and non-human animals than to plants ($p< .001$) and were more likely to attribute life status to plants than to natural-kinds ($p< .01$) or to artifacts ($p< .001$). An inspection of Figure 2 reveals a developmental progression: Five-year-olds denied life status to plants, but at all other ages, performance was at chance levels. Thus, even adults did not reliably include plants when sorting on the basis of *alive*.

In essence, then, despite their extensive daily contact with the natural world, *Wichí* people tend to deny that plants are “alive” (*iloy*). This suggests that life status is aligned strongly with animate objects.

**DIE.** These same participants exhibited a very different pattern when sorting these

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11 Preliminary analyses revealed no differences within animals, within plants, within natural-kinds or within artifacts, and therefore we collapsed across these to test our hypotheses.
An ANOVA revealed only a main effect for category, $F(4, 54) = 215.2 \ p < .001$. Importantly, however, for this predicate, participants at all ages were more likely to include humans and non-human animals than plants ($p < .01$), but were also more likely to include plants than either natural-kinds or artifacts ($p < .001$).

This analysis suggests that *Wichí*-speaking children and adults appreciate the concept ANIMATE, as witnessed by their sorting on the basis of the predicate “alive”. In addition, they appreciate the LIVING THING concept, as witnessed by their sorting on the basis of the predicate “die”. Each of these different patterns is in line with their belief system. Under the “alive” term (*iloy*), *Wichí* children and adults included animals and people. This is aligned with the preferred extension of *husek* which was attributed to animate beings (humans and animals) with autonomous motion or goal-directed behavior and denied to plants because they are inert entities (Palmer, 2005; Experiment 1 in this paper). However, note that *Wichí* people consider plants along with animals and humans owners of a vital sense (vital will) responsible of the biological process such as growth or decomposition, processes that are common for the three categories (Palmer, 2005). We suggest that the “die” (*yhil*) term as a biological process, may have activated animals, people and also plants making the way to include all living things. These alignments (“alive” – ANIMATE; “die” - LIVING THING) have also been observed in other populations, including urban and rural English-speaking adults and children (from both European- and Native-American communities) and urban Indonesian-speaking children (Angorro, et.al, 2008; Leddon, et. al, 2008; Waxman & Medin, 2006).

In designing this experiment, we offered several reasons to suspect that when sorting on the basis of ‘alive”, *Wichí* children might attribute life status to plants in early childhood. More specifically, we noted the cultural significance of plants in *Wichí* culture, *Wichí* children’s extensive contact with plants in their daily lives, and the fact that in *Wichí* (as in
Indonesian) the ANIMATE concept is unnamed (Angorro, et.al, 2008). However, the current experiment offers no evidence that Wichí children attribute life status to plants in early childhood. Instead, their performance is consistent with the notion that the representation of certain core folkbiological concepts such as ANIMATE are universal, even in the face of striking cross-cultural and cross-linguistic variation in experience. At all ages, Wichí’s predominant response pattern converged on the concept ANIMATE. This concept, which is acquired early (e.g. Berthenthal, 1993; Gelman, 1990; Gelman & Gottfried, 1996; Opfer & Gelman, 2001), is strongly aligned with the primary extension of husek and with the Wichí origin myth (Palmer, 2005; Wilbert & Somoneau, 1982). This suggests an intriguing hypothesis: that the influence of the Wichí culture and belief system are sufficiently strong to maintain access to the ANIMATE interpretation of “alive” across development. It is worth noting, for example, that the adults who participated in our experiments have limited Western-orientated education, little contact with Spanish language and culture, and little contact with non-Wichí people. This constellation of factors may work together to support and preserve community-wide beliefs.

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12 According to Palmer’s version of the myth, criollos also come from animals but one from a different kind—the bull—an animal species introduced by Spanish people during the colonization. Even nowadays, it is said that the bull have a negative connotation for Wichí people.
General Discussion

The present results constitute the first empirical evidence about folkbiological concepts in Wichí adults and children. More specifically, we considered the acquisition of two fundamental biological concepts - LIVING THING and its powerful constituent ANIMATE BEING - within an indigenous community with a constellation of linguistic and cultural experiences that differ importantly from the ones held by participants in most folkbiology psychological research. Like people from other communities studied to date, Wichí children and adults represent the ANIMATE concept. Study 1 reveals that this concept is aligned well with the extension of the primary interpretation of husek and with the predicate “alive”. Study 2 reveals that Wichí children and adults also represent the LIVING THING concept, and that this concept is aligned with the secondary extension of the term husek and with the predicate “die”.

These results open several avenues for more extended investigation. For example, it will be important to gain further insight into how the Wichí construe the relation between agency, animacy and life status. Another goal for future investigations is to examine whether and how Wichí understanding of the natural world varies as a function of gender. Recall that most of the adult participants in the current investigation were women. It will be important to see whether men and women share the same intuitions about the phenomena that we have investigated here, and to identify the specialized knowledge that Wichí men and women have about plants and animals. Further, working with younger Wichí children and even infants will allow us to identify which of these concepts (if any) are available from the start.

Another goal will be to examine the other native populations of the Chaco Forest. For example, The Pilagá people, who live nearby and have also preserved their native language (Pilagá), differ from the Wichí in many of their beliefs, especially those pertaining to the
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spiritual world (Vidal, personal communication). Comparing Wichí and Pilagá will permit a more fine-grained analysis of the contribution of cultural beliefs to the acquisition of folkbiological concepts.

The current paper underscores the importance of considering the relation between folkbiological concepts and the belief systems in which those concepts are embedded, especially if our goal is to discover how cultural models shape this relationship. This work may have implications for science education. Understanding the notions that children bring with them to the classroom may be essential for designing a curriculum that while improving their understanding of science preserves their knowledge about the natural world.
Acknowledgments

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References


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Table 1

Proportion of husek attribution for each entity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test items</th>
<th>M</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Human</td>
<td>.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jaguar</td>
<td>.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dog</td>
<td>.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snake</td>
<td>.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vinchuca (Triatoma infestans)</td>
<td>.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mosquito</td>
<td>.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bottle Tree</td>
<td>.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cháguar (Bromelia sp.)</td>
<td>.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sun</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chair</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Triatoma infestans, commonly called “vinchuca” in Argentina, “barbeiro” in Brazil and also known as "kissing bug" in English, is a blood-sucking bug (like all the members of its subfamily Triatominae) and the most important vector of Trypanosoma cruzi which can lead to Chagas disease very common in the region of the Chaco forest.

Cháguar is the common name of two related species (Bromelia hieronymi and Bromelia urbaniana) of South American plants of the Bromeliaceae family which are non-woody forest plants with sword-shaped evergreen leaves. These plants are extensively employed by Wichí people; they provide a durable fiber that can be woven to make a large variety of textile products: bags and purses, ponchos, skirts, fishing nets, string, ropes, hammocks, mats, covers and clothing.
Table 2
Test items used in Experiment 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Non-living Natural kind</th>
<th>Artifact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>People</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person (man)</td>
<td>Bee</td>
<td>Water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jaguar</td>
<td>Sun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Swallow-tailed kite</td>
<td>Cloud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Armadillo</td>
<td>Rock</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Piranha</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rattlesnake</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Animal           | Plant                  |          |
|------------------|                       |          |
| Bee              | Carob tree            |          |
| Jaguar           | Acacia                |          |
| Swallow-tailed kite | Cháguar (Bromelia sp.) |          |

*Note: The table contains test items used in Experiment 2 to illustrate Wichí folkbiological concepts.*
Fig. 1. A schematic depiction of *Wichí* names for fundamental concepts relative to the natural world. Note dotted nodes indicate that terms are still under examination.

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15 Although the *Wichí* concept INHABITANTS OF EARTH does not mean LIVING THING, they are close in meaning.
Figure 2. Proportion of life status attributions for each category as a function of age. Asterisks indicate different from chance (p<.001)
Figure 3. Proportion of death attributions for each category as a function of age. Asterisks indicate different from chance.