

Theory of mind and precursors to this event essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Around the age of four years children begin to understand that the world can be experienced in different ways by different people and may therefore have a distinctive belief about reality. This ability to attribute mental states to others is seen as evidence that children have a “theory of mind”, this enables children to explain people’s actions by assuming unobservable entities such as feelings and desires. A theory of mind is therefore a device for understanding social behaviour. Children’s ability to understand that other people may have different feelings from their own is progressively developed throughout infancy.

Empathy and children verbally referring to other people’s mental state are among various precursors to the development of a theory of mind. The general supposition that a theory of mind is developed around the age of four is supported by the false belief paradigm, developed by Wimmer and Perner 1983. Children aged three and four were presented with stories in which a character holds a belief which the child knows to be false and thus different from his/her own. The question is whether the child can correctly predict the character’s action given the false belief. An example of this is the ‘Sally Anne Task’: Sally places a marble in a basket and then leaves the room, whereupon Anne moves the marble to another location. Sally returns and looks for the marble.

The child being tested is then asked where Sally will look. Most three year olds will think that Sally will look in the new location, therefore showing their inability to infer a false belief to Sally. However, from four years on children will give the right answer; they can understand that others may have beliefs which do not reflect reality. Until around four years of age children assume

that there is only one world, which matches with their own experience. The false belief paradigm shows that such children cannot yet mentally represent to themselves alternative views -those different from their own- of a particular event.

When children have developed a theory of mind they obtain the ability to represent another person's conflicting view and can understand another's lack of knowledge. They have come to realise that what one person believes to be true may actually be false. These new abilities depend on various precursors which are evident at earlier ages. P L Harris (1989) argues that the acquisition of a theory of mind depends on the development of self-awareness, the capacity for pretence and the ability to distinguish reality from pretence. Self awareness is apparent from quite an early age, it is obvious in children's' expression of their feelings and desires. This is an indicator of a child's understanding of mental operations generally.

We can see children developing a capacity for pretence through make-believe play as they attribute mental states to dolls, for example, therefore suggesting an understanding of how other people work. Ultimately when children manage to differentiate between reality and pretence -realising that other people are not just an extension of the child's only desires. Harris argues that it is only when this appears that children will not confuse the mental states of others with their own and that it is not until the fourth year that children can imagine another person's feelings and views even though they are not the child's own. Durkin¹ had developed this path to a theory of mind and knowledge of others and argues that it involves distinguishing people from other things, discovering the characteristics of individuals, and

<https://assignbuster.com/theory-of-mind-and-precursors-to-this-event-essay/>

finally learning that others have an independent psychological existence (a theory of mind).

Unlike adults, infants have much less experience in distinguishing between people and other things. Piaget (1936) argued that children only became concerned with people and their differences from other people at the end of the first year. However, many have argued that infants are interested in people from birth. People provide the most interesting stimulus. They have vivid facial expressions and sound producing devices, and provide food. However, as Sylvester Bradley (1986) argues, this does not mean that infants are aware of people's internal properties, such as feelings.

Experiments by Richards (1974) and repeated by Sylvester Bradley, show infants to be responsive to a mother -adjusting their facial behaviour and looks- than to an inanimate object which was moving. This appears valid only when mothers interact with the child, as Tronick et al's (1979) experiments show, when a child does not "know" they are interacting with a person because they are not responsive and inanimate, the child clearly shows signs of distress and smiles less. An experiment by Feldman and Ruble (1981) suggests that children of a young age -although commenting less on the internal states of others than older children or adults- do make character assessments and attribute feelings to other children if a social motivational variable is introduced. That is, when they anticipate future interaction with the other child.

Once children begin to appreciate other's character, they can see that it may be different from their own -shown, for example, in their expression of dislike

for another child- and this is culminated in the acquisition of a theory of mind as they understand that other's may hold views different from their own. However, at this juncture, it is important to note that the attainment of a theory of mind is not immediate, and just as gradually as children develop understanding of others in stages, their theory of mind is developed throughout their childhood. Selman argues (1976) that it is not until 8 or 10 years old that a child can properly put themselves in a person's place to really understand their intentions (which conflict with their own). Rudolph Schaffer² puts forward the argument that because children display empathy -emotional responsiveness which an individual shows to the feelings experienced by another person- they are therefore not entirely egocentric until they acquire a theory of mind. A study by Zahn and Wilder (1982) showed that children as young as 10 months old replicated signs of distress which they observed in adults. Slightly older children tried to actively intervene and comfort those in distress by touching or patting them and children from 18 months old expressed verbal sympathy or sought help.

Hoffman (1988) explains empathy as a four stage process, showing a developing precursor to children managing to attribute internal states to others. The first level is global empathy whereby -in the first year- children may replicate the emotion they witness, such as crying when another child is crying, however, Hoffman argues that the emotion is " involuntary and undifferentiated". The second level is egocentric empathy when children offer help to those in distress, help which they would find comforting themselves. Third is empathy for another's feelings; children have developed role-taking skills -initiated by make believe play, as argued by P L Harris- and

are more aware that other people can have different feelings than the child's own. Therefore their responses to distress are more suited to the other person's needs.

The final stage in development of empathy. This coincides with the attainment of a theory of mind. Empathy for another's life condition occurs by late childhood and they can appreciate that the person's distress may stem from earlier experience and not just the immediate situation; and can also be found with respect to entire groups of people, the poor for example, enforcing this idea. The research on empathy shows that, from a very early age, children do have a capacity for the appreciation of other people as thinking and feeling individuals.

Studies by Bretherton and Beeghly (1982) show that children's spontaneous talk about other people's internal states leads to the same conclusion. From the third year children are more aware of other people's emotions and can comment on their motivations. For example, the excerpt "you sad, Mommy. What Daddy do?" shows a child's discussion of how his or another person's state has been caused or changed. Examples such as this show that children cannot therefore be completely egocentric as they appear aware that another person may be experiencing feelings different from their own. Infants become self-aware at a very early age as they begin to express their own feelings and desires.

Through make-believe play -which develops role-playing skills- children learn to attribute mental states to others and appreciate that others may have different characteristics from their own. Responding to other's distress with

sympathy and understanding is progressively developed throughout infancy, talking about other people's distress has also shown that children can appreciate that other people do not think and feel the same way that they do. All of these developments culminate in the acquisition of a theory of mind, children's knowledge that other people are thinking and feeling beings becomes more coherent at this stage of development.