

# Developmental psychologists



**Many developmental psychologists maintain that, from a very early age, infants relate to people in a special way, and that this indicates they have a deep understanding of other people. In your view, is this position supported by research studies that have investigated infant's understanding of the physical and social world?**

The main purpose of this essay was to assess whether the research evidence supports the statement that infants have a deep understanding of other people. Although the question related to infants in general, the main emphasis was put on the first year of life as it is believed that this is a period when the most significant changes in infants' development occur (Super, 1981). Firstly, the writer attempted to define the term "deep understanding" which has been seen as crucial for this debate. Then, the focus moved to the nature of infants' relationships with other people. Afterwards, the research studies were examined that have investigated infant's understanding of the physical world. The aim was to check whether children have a knowledge of objects and people's physical features, and consequently, if they are able to differentiate between them. Finally, the researches which investigated infants' understanding of social world were analysed in order to check how rich infants' knowledge of other people is.

The debate of whether infants have a rich knowledge has to be preceded with defining what it means to have a deep understanding. In the case of a physical world deep understanding would be an awareness of physical properties and the permanence of objects, as well as knowledge of how certain actions make an effect on the physical world (Spelke, 1991).

However, the definition of the deep understanding of people perceived was more complicated. Surely the ability to recognise that people are different to objects is important as it requires a certain level of understanding. Equally

important is also the knowledge of what is going on in other people's minds and the ability to appreciate that ' people have emotions, intentions, and perspectives' (Striano & Rochat, 2000: 254).

Nevertheless, it has been believed that deep understanding must also involve something additional. This extra quality has been acknowledged by Tomasello et al. (2005: 676), who argued that:

'(...) deep understanding of other people requires not only an understanding of goals, intentions and perceptions of other persons, but also in addition a motivation to share these things in interaction with others.'

The psychologists who perceive children as having a rich knowledge share the belief that infants relate to people in a special way and engage with them differently than with objects. They argue that infants are more likely to direct their intentional behaviours towards people rather than objects because they anticipate that people will understand their intentions and respond to their actions. Trevarthen (ED841, Unit 3) explained this phenomenon by arguing that infants have an inborn willingness to participate in social relationships with other people.

As Suzanne Zeedyk stated, the everyday intimate in nature interaction with others creates a context in which infants' understanding can develop. In her opinion, thanks to being an object of other people's attention, children come to know themselves and others. However, the perception of infants' as active social partners causes some doubts. Even though Trevarthen seems to be right stating that infants are not just marionettes which can be animated by adults, it is possible that their engagement with people may only create an

illusion of spontaneity and understanding (Zeedyk, 2006). Indeed, it has been acknowledged that there is no consensus whether young infants actually differentiate between objects and people and what mechanisms underlay their behaviour. To investigate this issue it was necessary to establish what knowledge about the physical world they hold.

The chosen starting point was Piaget's study on objects' permanence. He argued that if an object is covered by a cloth, infants younger than nine months stop reaching for it and do not attempt to lift the cloth, even though they are physically able to perform this action. On this basis, Piaget argued that for infants younger than nine months, objects exist only while it is perceived or acted upon and it is out of an infant's mind when it disappears (Hood & Willatts, 1995). These findings are believed to be significant for a debate on children's understanding of the social world. Contrary to earlier mentioned psychologists, Jean Piaget claimed that young infants do not distinguish between people and objects, but rather treated people as the most interesting of objects and that is why they concentrate on them more intensively. Analogously to object permanence, Piaget argued that children younger than nine months cannot have a deep understanding of other people as they do not have knowledge of people's permanence. They rather acquire this knowledge at a later stage thanks to their cognitive development and experience (ED841, Unit 2; Baillargeon, 1995; Piaget & Inhelder, 1966).

Although Piaget's theory appeared to be convincing, it has been acknowledged that his experiment has been criticised by other researchers who argued that infants failed this task not because they have not developed

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object permanence but because there are not able to perform coordinated actions. Therefore, it was difficult for them to coordinate lifting the cloth with their memory for the object (Baillargeon, 1995).

To check whether infants hold an understanding of object permanence, Piaget's findings have been compared with the results of investigations which did not require coordinated action. An example chosen was Baillargeon's drawbridge experiment. This habituation study researched infants' understanding of 'the principle that a solid object cannot move through the space occupied by another solid object' (Baillargeon, 1995: 104). Baillargeon wanted to investigate whether five month old infants would be surprised by visible objects in the form of a screen rotating back and forth at 180 degrees, which moved through the space occupied by a hidden cube. The assumption was that if infants were surprised it meant that they were aware of the existence and physical properties of the hidden object. In contrast to Piaget's study, this experiment indicated that very young infants may have a core understanding of object properties and therefore they should also have the knowledge of people's permanence (Baillargeon, 1995; ED841, Unit 2). On the other hand, some of the researches stated that the habituation methodology may overestimate infants' understanding. For instance, as proved by Schilling, results similar to those gained by Piaget may be obtained simply by varying the number of presentations in the drawbridge experiment. Therefore, Schilling argued that Baillargeon failed to prove that infants have a deep understanding of the physical world (ED841, Unit 2). Also, Cohen referred to the drawbridge experiment by stating that

infants ' may be responding to the apparently impossible event, not because it is impossible, but simply because it is familiar' (Cohen, 2001: 6).

So far it seems that children, especially in the first few months of life, have rather poor knowledge of the physical world and consequently they may also have poor knowledge of other people. The radical change was believed to occur at around nine months of life. However, the research evidence presented by Woodward on six month old infants' showed that they have expectations directed towards people, which they do not share with inanimate things. Therefore, he argued that infants not only see people as separate to objects, but also recognise that people have certain goals and intentions (Tomasello et al., 2005). The writer is convinced that at the end of the first year of life, infants understand people as animate beings who spontaneously produce behaviour, but there is no agreement whether they understand the mechanism underlying their behaviour or they are just simply able to predict what people would do. For instance, the research on infants' understanding of goal-directed actions, like for example those of Gregley and Csiba, showed that one year old infants perceive the successful actions as goal directed, but it ' does not necessarily imply that they appreciate the intentions underlying those actions' (Brandone & Wellman, 2008: 86).

It is believed that the ability to understand that other people have mental states is a part of the so-called theory of mind, which is assumed not to develop in children younger than 4 years (Bretherton et al., 1981).

There was a series of research investigating the signs of development of the theory of mind in infants. For instance, Reedy (2007) observed the development of deception among infants. Her findings indicated that eight month old infants are able to deceive, even though in theory this skill does not develop until a child acquires theory of mind. Therefore, Reedy argued that because at around eight months children, for example, fake crying or pretend deafness when called by their mother, which indicates that they have a real understanding of other people. However, Reedy has been criticised for overestimating children's abilities and misinterpreting infants' behaviours. For instance, it has been argued that infants are egocentric. Consequently, children may ignore mothers' calls because they are concentrated on themselves and things they are doing in that moment (Carlowe, 2008).

More probable seems to be the explanation presented by Baron and Cohen, who stated that young infants are unable to understand what is going on in other people's minds. However, they argue that at around 6-9 months, infants try to seek other people's focus of attention by following the direction of their eye gaze. This inborn ability, called the eye direction detector, lets infants note where another person is looking. Subsequently, infants become able to distinguish between their own and other people's reactions to an object, which is a basis for later theory of mind development. However, it is not clear whether infants perceive other person's eye movements as significant and understand that adults are directing their attention towards an object. It is possible that they just follow other people's eye gaze without paying attention to the object itself (Meltzoff, 2004, ED841, Unit 2).

As mentioned before, Tomasello stressed that understanding intentional actions and perceptions of others is not itself sufficient to talk about the deep understanding of infants. In his opinion, it requires shared intentionality which refers 'to collaborative interactions in which participants share psychological states with one another' (Tomasello & Carpenter, 2007: 121). His longitudinal study on chimpanzees showed that they were similar to human infants in a whole range of socio-cognitive skills, but in contrast to infants, they do not appear to have shared intentionality. Tomasello therefore stated that infants do not only follow other people's eye gaze but try to share other people's attention. The motivation to share attention with others emerges at around the first birthday, which supports the belief that this is the time when more advanced cognitive understanding occurs (Tomasello & Carpenter, 2007).

Meltzoff emphasised that information about objects and people's shared intentions towards these objects are acquired through imitation. He argued that to imitate, children have to be able to understand the differences between themselves and others. Even though Piaget argued that infants cannot imitate others until they were 8 to 12 months of age, Meltzoff's research on infants early imitation showed that they are not only able to imitate facial expressions of adults but also recognise when adults imitate them which is a sign of deep understanding. However, the critical analysis of his research indicated that children may imitate adults but not be aware of the fact that they are copying emotional expression. Additionally, Meltzoff examined very young infants and there is a possibility that they might just be trained to imitate from birth (Meltzoff & Gopnik, 1993).

Summarising, it appears that infants prefer people over the objects, but there is no agreement whether it is a sign of an understanding of other people's thoughts and intentions or rather an inborn ability to engage in social interactions. Some psychologists, like for example Piaget, argued that very young infants have only basic social abilities. Although infants' behaviour cannot only be seen as a set of reflexes, psychologists claim that they have a deep understanding of other people would undoubtedly overestimate their abilities. The most appropriate explanation seems to be that infants are born with rather poor knowledge about the physical and social world; however, they have an inborn ability to interact with other people. Through the everyday interaction with others their knowledge and skills can develop, and consequently, infants' understanding of the world becomes deeper.