

The Beginnings of Social Understanding

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Preface

This book happened to grow out of quite a different enterprise. About seven years ago I was studying firstborn children over the period when a sibling was born, in order to see the developing relationship between the two young children and its connections with other family relationships. But that study, which involved long observations in the children's homes, developed in an unexpected direction. Sitting in the kitchens and living rooms of the families, watching the games, jokes, and disputes between the siblings and their complex relationships with the parents, I became fascinated with the glimpses of understanding that much of the children's social behavior appeared to reflect. Not only the firstborn children, but most surprisingly some of their younger siblings early in the second year showed a clear practical grasp of how to annoy or comfort the other child. This suggested powers of understanding in these young children well beyond those we might expect from studies of children outside the familiar emotional world of the family—but the incidents involving the younger siblings were too few to provide more than provocative anecdotes. I decided to pursue the issue with systematic studies of children's understanding of the feelings and behavior of others in their family world, observing the children within the drama and excitement of family life, and this led to the research on which my book is based.

I must emphasize that these *are* systematic studies. Although I have used quotations and examples to illustrate the children's growing understanding, they are not simply anecdotes—bizarre or freakish incidents at odds with the general pattern found for the fifty-two secondborn children we studied, after the eighty children of the initial research. Rather the examples serve to support conclusions drawn from careful, documented study. Thus the instances of children's teasing, justifications, and excuses, their behavior as witnesses to disputes between others,

their cooperative behavior and response to distress in others, their questions and narratives about others, all illustrate actions for which I also give frequencies for the full sample of the relevant study (frequencies are indicated in the figures and appendix tables). A partial exception is the material on jokes. Although I give some overall frequencies here, for some of the verbal categories—with our very young children—there are insufficient examples to merit presenting frequencies for each category.

So throughout the book, while the children's remarks are often funny, sometimes poignant, they are not intended merely to amuse or divert but to highlight more general findings. Rather than belaboring the point, I shall quote an earlier writer who made it trenchantly. In 1798 Maria Edgeworth, in her *Practical Education*, a refreshingly sensible book on childrearing (full of illuminating observations based largely on her own fourteen children), tells the reader rather sternly that, in order to set before the public the results of her experiments, she was often "obliged to record facts concerning children which may seem trifling, and to enter into a minuteness of detail which may appear unnecessary. No anecdotes, however, have been admitted without due deliberation; nothing has been introduced to gratify the idle curiosity of others, or to indulge our own feelings of domestic partiality" (p. vi).

The studies I draw on for this book were supported by the Medical Research Council in Great Britain. I would like to thank the families of Cambridge who took part for their generous help, interest, and patience. I have changed the names of the children to ensure their anonymity. The studies were conducted in collaboration with Penny Munn, whose enthusiastic, thoughtful commitment to the project was indispensable. Much of the book was written while I was a Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, Stanford University, with a grant from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, and I am very grateful for that opportunity and for the many good discussions I had with other Fellows, especially John Darley and Richard Shweder.

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Understanding Others?

There is nothing for which nature seems to have given us such a bent as for society.

—Montaigne, *Essays*, 1580

Children are born into a complex social world: from infancy on, they are active participants in a world of other people—adults and children, familiar and not-so-familiar others. On commonsense grounds it seems reasonable to argue that it is important for them to begin to understand the intentions, feelings, and actions of others who share their world and to comprehend the social rules of that world.

Yet when we come to consider the beginnings of this understanding—apparently of such adaptive importance that it would be high on the developmental agenda—we face a paradox. From research on infancy we know that babies are born predisposed to learn about sounds and sights that are characteristic features of *people*. They are particularly attentive to shapes and patterns that are like faces and to sounds that fall in the frequency range of the female human voice. As babies they learn especially fast about stimuli that change in a way that is contingent upon their own behavior—just as in real life people do. At two months old, they distinguish a person who intends to communicate with them from one who speaks to someone else (Trevvarthen, 1977). Studies of the development of the ability of infants to perceive that the person one sees is the person one hears, and that certain visual and sound patterns specify the same individual, show that “Infants appear to possess innately, or to develop quickly, remarkable abilities to perceive the actions and expressions of other people” (Spelke and Cortelyou, 1981).

By the time they are seven to eight months old, we know that babies are tuned in to the different emotional expressions of adults. In situations of uncertainty, they monitor the emotional expressions of their mothers and respond differently, and appropriately, to those expressions (Klinnert et al., 1983). If they observe their mothers interacting positively with a stranger, they are less wary of that stranger subsequently than babies whose mothers interact neutrally (Feiring, Lewis, and Starr, 1984). They are sensitive to the direction of gaze of another person and seem to try to look in the same direction (Scaife and Bruner, 1975). As Rochelle Gelman and Elizabeth Spelke comment, "Infants as well as adults attempt to discover what others are doing or feeling" (1981, p. 51). At about nine months they notice the congruence between their own affective state and the affective expression on someone else's face (McKain et al., 1985). By this age, too, they are beginning to cooperate effectively with others in games (peekaboo, hide-and-seek) and in the familiar routines of being fed, changed, and dressed.

Most strikingly, babies are beginning to share a communicative framework of gestures and signals with others, waving goodbye appropriately when someone leaves, signaling their own requests with gestures shared by all family members. And this ability to understand and use a common communicative framework is particularly clear in infants' attempts to make their wishes and needs clear. As Jerome Bruner comments, their means to an end quickly includes the actions of other people, and "the infant's principal 'tool' for achieving his ends is another person" (1983). Babies are highly social, sociable creatures.

If, however, we ask about older children's ability to understand the emotions, perceptions, and intentions of other people, we find that research into perspective-taking tells us that children develop these abilities relatively slowly. This is the paradox. These abilities are apparently crucial for the individual, central to human evolution—yet they appear to develop, according to one tradition in developmental psychology, relatively slowly. When children of four, five, or six are faced with tasks

that require them to take the perspective of others, or to make judgments about the feelings of people in stories or films (the experimental paradigm that psychologists have usually employed to understand the growth of these abilities), they often have real difficulties (Shantz, 1983). The original Piagetian picture of children as “egocentric” until they are six or seven has, of course, been drastically changed with experimental studies showing that the design of the tests crucially affects the abilities of the children to take the perspective of others. A developmental change from ignoring to being able to share a perspective can be demonstrated to take place at dramatically different ages—at eighteen months, at two and a half years, at four or even at ten years—according to the task and setting chosen (Flavell, 1985). But this research tells little about the nature of children’s capabilities in the setting of their daily family life or about how these change with development.

So do children not develop these all-important capabilities until well after infancy? Do we conclude that for a child the crucial development of becoming human—the understanding that other people have feelings and minds like his or her own, yet also different—is extremely slow? Children develop their powers of communication, understanding, and thought, their emotional security and their sense of themselves, within a complex social framework: do they nevertheless fail to grasp the nature of the moods, interests, and relationships of others who share that world, or the ground rules of that world, until they are five or seven years old? When and how do children begin to understand the feelings and intentions of other people, the social rules and roles of the world in which they grow up?

Piaget and Sullivan argued that in the “decentering” processes by which children overcome difficulties in understanding others, it is the arguments and disagreements between five- or six-year-olds that are of key importance. In these disputes, they suggested, children are forced for the first time to take account of the differing views and perspectives of another person (Piaget, 1932; Sullivan, 1953). What then of the period between infancy and this stage of the disputes between articulate school-age

children, who impel each other to face one another's point of view? How do children behave in the world of the family, if their social understanding is indeed so very limited?

Here we face a gap. There is a wealth of research on the first year of life, research that beautifully documents the nature of infants' social behavior, their fine-tuned responsiveness to the behavior and moods of other people (see for example Stern, 1985). There is also a flourishing tradition of research on the capability (and incapability) of school-age children to take the perspective of others, and on their developing ideas about friendship, authority, and justice (Damon, 1977; Selman, 1980; Youniss, 1980). Between these two fields of research, in the period of the transition from infancy to childhood, there is a relatively unexplored area. It is unexplored in part because the development of social intelligence has only recently become a matter of interest to developmental psychologists concerned with the second and third years of childhood. While clinicians have long been concerned with the infant's developing sense of identity and autonomy over this age period (Mahler, Pine, and Bergman, 1975), for developmental psychologists it is the dramatic developments in acquisition of language and symbolic representation, of communicative skills and categorization of the object world, that have held center stage. These do of course have profound implications for the development of children's social intelligence. But with the notable exception of those interested in the pragmatics of early language, and of a small group of psychologists interested in young children's "theories of mind," psychologists studying the acquisition of language or conceptual development have not been primarily concerned with the nature of children's understanding of their social world.

Moreover, the development of human social understanding and communication involves a wide range of abilities in addition to the acquisition of syntax or even semantics. People do not simply cue each other into propositional exchanges: they communicate their moods and desires, their sense of absurdity and amusement, disapproval, pride or shame. They communicate shared beliefs about the way life should be lived and about

relationships between the members of their world in a variety of subtle and not-so-subtle ways. To become a *person*—a member of that complex world—children must develop powers of recognizing and sharing emotional states, of interpreting and anticipating others' reactions, of understanding the relationships between others, of comprehending the sanctions, prohibitions, and accepted practices of their world. We have learned much of the nature of social and emotional communication in infancy from laboratory studies, but on children's understanding of their social world, our information is very sketchy. Why should this be?

Our ignorance is in part a result of the way in which developmental psychology has grown and is practiced. Children have rarely been studied in the world in which these developments take place, or in a context in which we can be sensitive to the subtleties of their social understanding. Psychology has developed as an experimental science, with all the strengths of precision and of causal explanation that this implies, but also with the consequence that the developments within the complex emotional world of the family have been neglected (with the notable exception of language acquisition). In domains such as the development of numeracy or logical reasoning, changes in children's cognitive capacity in the early years have come under stringent scrutiny, with elegant experimental studies (Gelman and Baillargeon, 1983; Markman, 1981). But developments in social understanding are less amenable to experimental investigation with very young children. Open a textbook on developmental psychology and look for the sections on preschool children's social behavior: you will probably find a section on the attachment of child to parent (and this may well be a discussion of the relationship only in terms of the behavior of the child when separated from the parent in a fifteen-minute laboratory assessment) and a section on behavior with peers (usefully accessible to the psychologist in a daycare center or playgroup). These are centrally important features of children's social behavior. But what about the children's relationships within the world in which they grow up and their understanding

of that world—a world in which the relationship between parent and child is very much more than what we can hope to capture in the laboratory “strange situation,” a world shared with grandparents, friends, neighbors, and siblings?

Some of the research currently being carried out on children’s communication, their understanding of mental phenomena and their symbolic play, is clearly relevant to the beginnings of social understanding. Most strikingly, studies of how children use language show that children begin to understand the *intentions* behind speech very early. Bruner (1983) very clearly presents the argument that, before the child is a skilled language user, he has learned something of what is “canonical, obligatory, and valued” in his culture. He knows, for instance, a great deal about the cultural conditions of requesting a year before he knows how to apply the grammatical inversion rule for framing a question. And in achieving the skills of referential or requesting communication, children have begun to coordinate their language and actions with those of other people in ways that are culturally prescribed.

But the course of development of that cultural understanding in the second and third year remains unclear. We do know that children in the second year become increasingly aware of adult standards, from Jerome Kagan’s pioneering work (1981). We also know something of children’s sensitivity to the emotional states of others during this period, from the work of early psychologists (see Chapters 5 and 6) and from the more recent work of Radke-Yarrow, Zahn-Waxler, and their colleagues. Their studies have shown that during the second year children’s responses to the distress of others become increasingly differentiated, and their ability to comfort increasingly effective (Zahn-Waxler and Radke-Yarrow, 1982). The same researchers have demonstrated that if children of this age witness angry quarrels between adults, they get very upset and are themselves more likely to be aggressive. This interest that children show in emotions is documented too in studies of children’s verbal references to feeling states. Children begin to talk about their own and other peoples’ feelings toward the end of the second year and do

so with increasing differentiation and frequency during the third (Bretherton, McNew, and Beeghly-Smith, 1981; Dunn, Bretherton, and Munn, 1986).

A child's ability to talk about mental states—knowing, thinking, believing, remembering—develops later, during the third year (Shatz, Wellman, and Silber, 1983). The nature of three- and four-year-olds' growing understanding of "other minds" has been the focus of the research of Henry Wellman and his colleagues (Johnson and Wellman, 1982; Wellman, 1985, 1986; Wellman and Estes, 1986). These studies document the coherence in children's understanding of mental phenomena and their grasp of the causes of human action in terms of beliefs, desires, and intentions. Wellman, while pinpointing the deficiencies in their "theory of mind," argues that conversations of children at home show that children even younger than those who have been studied experimentally have an understanding of human action that is fundamentally akin to adult folk psychology: "It shares, in principle if not in detail, the basic belief-desire-intention framework for understanding human acts . . . this knowledge is coherent, rests on and mandates crucial ontological distinctions, and is centrally tied to a causal-explanatory framework" (1986, p. 23).

The focus of this work is the early development of explicit knowledge of the mind in children as they reach their third birthday and beyond. Wellman's argument fits well with other evidence for children's interest in the causes of human behavior, notably the analyses by Lois Bloom and her colleagues of children's early causal comments and questions (Bloom and Capatides, 1987; Hood and Bloom, 1979). These show that children's early essays into discussion of cause are focused on *psychological* causality; they are about why people act the way they do, about how sociocultural practices, emotions, and judgments are reasons for actions.

This picture of the interest in human behavior that three-year-olds demonstrate within the family links in an important and convincing fashion with what we know of four-year-olds' understanding of mental phenomena and the social world. For

instance Susan Carey, studying conceptual change in children between four and twelve years old, has drawn attention to what she terms children's "intuitive psychology," an explanatory system in which wants and beliefs account for actions. She shows that such a "theory" is well established by the age of four. And other experimental research has certainly demonstrated that four-five-year-olds have the ability to understand and talk about phenomena such as intentions and false beliefs (Schulz, 1980; Wimmer and Perner, 1983). But what, Carey asks, is the origin of this intuitive psychology? Her own guess is "that infants are endowed with the tools to build an intuitive psychology, just as they are endowed with the tools to build an intuitive mechanics and a human language" (1985, p. 200). Whether or not this guess is correct, she comments, is an important issue for those who seek explanatory theories of learning. From a very different perspective, Barbara Tizard and Martin Hughes (1985), studying the conversations of four-year-olds at home with their mothers, have given us a vivid picture of the children's curiosity and logical powers, one that highlights the remarkable breadth of interest that four-year-olds show in their social world.

Research into the development of children's make-believe amplifies our picture of the beginnings of social understanding. Studies of children's solitary play with "replica" objects and dolls demonstrate how in their pretend play they begin to represent two-party interactions with simple narratives involving different roles (Nicholich, 1975). Note, however, that while children's doll play is a favorite context for developmentalists and clinicians, it is not clear precisely how children's enactment of social situations and narratives with dolls relates to their understanding of people in real life, a point that Dennie Wolf has emphasized. According to her detailed study of a boy growing from infant to toddler, the child's understanding of others' agency and experience surfaces *later* in his doll play than in his own goal-directed actions (Wolf, 1982). The question of how and when we should use children's play narratives to examine

their understanding of other people and events remains an open one, and one that is important to explore.

It should be noted, too, that much of this research on symbolic development in play has focused on a solitary child, playing alone with toys. We get a rather different picture of the development of the ability to represent others from studying children playing with their mother, siblings, or familiar peers. It has been clearly argued by those studying social play in the second year, and children's first essays into sociodramatic play, that such play shows us that "the foundations for interpersonal understanding" have been laid (Wolf, 1984). Yet studies of the earliest stages of children's abilities to enact and play with social roles and rules, developments that take place within the family in the second year, are still few and far between (but see Miller and Garvey, 1984; Dunn and Dale, 1984; Wolf, 1984).

Studies of the "scripts" that children acquire for their familiar daily routines are also important and relevant, although this research has not yet considered children's knowledge of feelings and relationships. And both in research into the mother-child attachment and in the growing literature on the early stages of children's sense of themselves, there is increasing interest in the question of how children respond to and understand their social world—interest, but little systematic study. In research on the attachment of child to mother, for example, theorists are now increasingly interested in exploring Bowlby's notion of the infant's "working model" of the mother and urge that we should turn our attention to understanding the infant's subjective experience of the relationship (Bretherton, 1985). In research on the development of sense of self, it is implicit, but rarely explicitly examined, that children's understanding of others develops along with their sense of self. Daniel Stern's work (1985), for instance, gives us an illuminating picture of the central part that developments in affective understanding and communication play in the child's developing sense of self; yet here, as in most writing on developments in the first and second year within a clinical framework, the focus is on changing conceptions of *self* rather than on children's conceptions of *others*.

What this exciting work on children's language, affective communication, play, conceptual development, and developing sense of self gives us is an impetus to look further at the nature of children's growing understanding of their social world, at how this is employed in and influences their relationships. With the few notable exceptions I have mentioned, there is little published study of the nature of children's understanding of others' emotions and intentions, of social rules, or of relationships between others in their own social world during the transition from infancy to childhood. The suggestion that children may in fact reflect on moral and social issues or on the feelings of others very early in development is sometimes tentatively made, as in the reflective essay on children's understanding of the distinction between animate and inanimate objects by Gelman and Spelke (1981), where they comment that "children may think in terms of the permissibility or the morality of actions at an early age." Similarly, Hoffman, writing on children's understanding of people and things, suggests from one anecdote: "If we may generalize tentatively from this instance, it would appear that some kind of rapid processing of information about other people's feelings, at least in familiar, highly motivating natural settings, is possible in children still in the sensory-motor period as regards the physical domain" (1981, p. 72).

The suggestions are tentative because the information is anecdotal. And our ideas on the processes underlying the developments in understanding over this period remain vague. From our textbooks we are left with the picture of one- and two-year-old children as largely incapable of reflecting upon the feelings and intentions of others, struggling with the crises of developing autonomy, individuation, and separation from the mother. To ask questions about the nature of such egocentric creatures' understanding of other people and of social rules seems quite inappropriate.

But if we set aside the textbook account and look at children in the world in which they grow up, the relevance of such questions about social intelligence is inescapable. This book

examines the nature of that social intelligence and its development. The concern is not to claim simply that children's capabilities develop six, twelve, or twenty-four months earlier than previously thought. Rather, the argument is about why and how children develop powers of social and moral understanding, about the relation between those powers and their social relationships, their sense of self, their driving self-interest, and their emotional experiences. I should emphasize at the outset that my focus on the children's emotions, motivation, and relationships does not imply a dismissal of cognitive mechanisms in the development of social understanding. Their importance is taken as a given. But the studies I shall describe suggest that the prevailing concentration on cognitive mechanisms as *independent* of emotional and motivational factors may not be providing the most useful framework for thinking about the development of social understanding.

My argument is developed by examining in turn a number of different facets of children's social behavior and relationships: their disputes, arguments, and behavior in conflict, their empathetic and cooperative behavior, their discussion of other people, their ability to take part in family conversation, their fantasy play and jokes. To make inferences about what children understand from a tally of the words they say without regard to their functional use, or from single isolated incidents of behavior, or from their pretend play alone, would clearly be hazardous and unwise. My strategy is to consider the children's behavior and speech in a variety of contexts, with different partners and in different emotional settings. I draw in part on the research of other developmental psychologists, in part on the writings and observations of those who have studied children in earlier times (whose observations are valuable because they study children within the family), but primarily on three longitudinal studies of families that my colleagues and I have carried out in Cambridge. Let us begin, after a brief look at the studies, with the children themselves, fighting, playing, talking—with the daily dramas of family life in which their powers of social intelligence are revealed and fostered.