

Early Development of Body Representations

EDITED BY

Virginia Slaughter and Celia A. Brownell

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Early Development of Body Representations

Edited by Virginia Slaughter and Celia A. Brownell

Because we engage with the world and each other through our bodies and bodily movements, being able to represent one's own and others' bodies is fundamental to human perception, cognition and behaviour. This edited book brings together, for the first time, developmental perspectives on the growth of body knowledge in infancy and early childhood and how it intersects with other aspects of perception and cognition. The book is organised into three sections, addressing the bodily self, the bodies of others and integrating self and other. Topics include perception and representation of the human form, infant imitation, understanding biological motion, self-representation, intention understanding, action production and perception and children's human figure drawings. Each section includes chapters from leading international scholars drawn together by an expert commentary that highlights open questions and directions for future research.

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Part I

The bodily self

1 Primordial sense of embodied self-unity

Philippe Rochat

Primordial sense of embodied self-unity

Infancy research of the past forty years defies long-held ideas regarding the starting state of mental life. These ideas were justified by the fact that we do not have any explicit recollection of our own infancy. Infantile amnesia was symptomatic of an initial absence of experiential unity and self-awareness. Prior to language, children were regarded as some kind of larvae, eventually emerging from their blind chrysalides to find embodied selfhood, meta-cognition, and explicit self-identity in the light of symbolic functioning and conceptual representations. There is an abundance of evidence now showing that un-memorable infancy does not equate to mindless infants.

The long-held assumptions of mindless and self-less infants, devoid at birth of experiential unity (i.e. a unified embodied experience), can be explained by a lack of consideration of the variety of ways one can be aware, including levels of self-awareness that are more or less explicit and conceptual (Rochat, 2009). Infant studies call for a distinction between experiential and conceptual awareness: the awareness that accompanies being and acting in the world toward preferred goals, versus the awareness of a conceptualized and re-cognized world (a phenomenal consciousness that has, in addition, cognitive accessibility), following the recent discussion and distinction proposed by Ned Block (2007).

If in development experiential awareness precedes conceptual awareness, in the same way for example that independent sitting precedes bi-pedal locomotion, or that babbling precedes speaking, it does not mean that one is lacking coherence and unity, the other eventually endowed with it. It does not mean, either, that one kind of awareness calls for selfhood and the other does not.

The basic argument made here is that both conceptual (i.e. early body representation, the topic of this volume) and experiential awareness call for

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