Constructing an understanding of mind with peers

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Abstract: Carpendale & Lewis (C&L) stress the importance of social interaction for social understanding, but focus on the adult-child relationship. In the present commentary, we discuss the development of social understanding within early peer relationships. We argue that peer interaction stretches the limits of early social understanding, thereby providing both unique challenges and unique opportunities for constructing an understanding of others' minds.

In their target article, Carpendale & Lewis (C&L) assert that children construct social understanding through interactions with others and that social knowledge is fundamentally based on action within these relationships. In particular, they emphasize that early triadic interaction facilitates the development of language and that conversation about the mental world, in turn, permits children to perceive, understand, and reflect on their own and others' mental and emotional states. We share the authors' view that social interaction contributes to social understanding. However, we believe that the authors have limited their argument by focusing so heavily on early parent-child interaction. In the present commentary we discuss the contributions of early peer interaction to social skill and social understanding. Although C&L acknowledge the "sibling effect" (Perner et al. 1994) and the role of cooperative interactions with age-mates for children's use of mental state terms (Brown et al. 1996), they do not discuss how interactions with siblings and peers differ from adult-child interactions, and the possibly unique role played by interactions with other children in generating early social understanding.

C&L argue that "children's initial, fragile social understanding" is "at first evident when *supported* by social interaction" (sect. 4.1, para. 9, emphasis ours) and that "children gradually construct social understanding through the *regularities* they experience in interacting with others" (sect. 3, para. 1, emphasis ours). In their formulation, the young child's adult partner supports social engagement through regular and routinized interaction and, in that context, interprets and labels the child's mental states. From our view, this type of cooperative interaction, although probably initially necessary for children's nascent social understanding, can take children only so far toward a more general understanding of mind. In routinized interactions, especially with a sensitive adult who has complex mental state understanding, the child has little need to predict the partner's behavior or to communicate his own mental states. When social partners' behavior is predictable, and when routines and communication are either built-in or highly learned, having to read minds is not necessary.

Peer interaction, in contrast, provides a social context in which children's partners are unpredictable and their goals, intentions, and desires are often difficult to read even for sensitive, mind-minded mothers. The challenges of interacting with peers may require that children be explicit about communicating their intentions. Consistent with this notion, Smiley (2001) found that toddlers were more likely to state their future intentions in peer play than in mother-child interactions. Furthermore, peer interaction also provides children their only opportunity for true cooperation, defined by both Piaget (1932/1965b) and C&L as "interaction among equals." Thus, peers pose both unique challenges and unique opportunities for the growth of early social understanding.

Children are capable of establishing and maintaining positive peer interactions in play and in cooperative problem-solving by the end of their second year (Brownell et al. 2003; Eckerman et al. 1989; Howes et al. 1989). Without a way to "make sense" of other children's behavior, the toddler cannot anticipate a peer's behavior, hence cannot behave in a coordinated, reciprocal, accommodating manner, and peers' behavior will simply be inscrutable for the very young child. The fact that children can imitate one another by 14 to 18 months (Eckerman et al. 1989; Hanna & Meltzoff 1993) but cannot cooperate with one another until 24 months or later (Brownell & Carriger 1990; Brownell et al. 2003; Tomasello et al. 1993) suggests that their early understanding of others' minds, as constructed in adult-child relationships, remains too incomplete to serve interaction more generally. Moreover, the social understanding that develops in the context of early peer play is not a function of mental state talk between peers. Nonverbal interaction may be even more important for children's developing social understanding of one another. Mutual imitation, for example, may provide the first means for children to begin making sense of their peers' behavior and may be the grist for generating initial understanding of peers' intentions (Eckerman et al. 1989).

Social understanding not only arises in situations of peer cooperation and positive interaction around a shared theme, goal, or desire, but may also be adaptive and necessary in instances of competition. It is notable that possession struggles and conflicts, which constitute a relatively high proportion of early peer interactions (Brownell & Brown 1992; Hay & Ross 1982), are unique to child-child interactions. When one toddler approaches another, the child must figure out whether the peer intends to hug her, play with her, take away her favorite toy, or something else. Caregivers are not always available to assist children in interpreting and understanding such situations, and even when they are present, they often prefer to let children figure it out on their own. Hence, children may be motivated to learn how to read other children's mental states and to understand the relations between mental states and behavior so that they can effectively negotiate ambiguous, emotionally charged situations. Such interactions may also provide children insight into the nature of their own emotional experiences (Balaraman et al. 2003).

We do not mean to suggest that parent-child relationships and peer relationships are unconnected, however. Young toddlers who are more responsive to an adult's bids for joint attention are also better at coordinating their actions with a peer toward a common goal (Brownell et al. 2003). Toddlers who have more positive experiences in play with their mothers engage in more complex social play with their peers (Howes & Stewart 1987; Zerwas & Brownell 2003). Thus, the social understanding children construct during interaction with adults is also brought to bear on their interactions with peers. Nevertheless, establishing and maintaining positive interactions with peer partners pose distinctive challenges both affectively and cognitively. Peer interaction thereby stretches the limits of children's early social understanding and makes unique contributions to its development.

Authors' Response

Constructing understanding, with feeling

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Abstract: We explore three types of criticisms of our theory on the development of children's social understanding. We reject suggestions that we offer nothing new to traditional theories of development or recent "social" accounts of "theory of mind." Second, we take the point that there are grounds for improving our

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X04590039 Published online by Cambridge University Press