

Transcript

Desires and beliefs

RESEARCHER:

So here is our idea. Suppose you take something very basic about what I like and what you like, which is the kind of food that we like. That's something that even very little babies know about. So we set up this situation in which the other person is expressing, telling the child that their desires, their likes, their wants are different from those of the child. And the question is, can the child use that information to make an inference about what my mental state is, even when that mental state is different from their own?

Watch. Watch. Look. Ooh, yuck. Ew. I tasted the crackers. Ew. Yuck. Ew. I tasted the crackers.

Now, look, Simon. Look. Mm. Broccoli. Mm. Look, Simon. Mm, mm, mm. I tasted the broccoli.

Now, Simon, could you give me some? Could you give me some? Can I have some? Very good. Thank you.

So what we found was that children younger than 18 months, about 14 months old, would consistently act as if we wanted the same thing they did. In other words, even though we'd said, yuck, crackers and yum, broccoli, the children themselves clearly so much themselves liked the crackers, so much themselves wanted the crackers that they attributed that desire to us too.

NARRATOR:

By the time he's two-years-old, Simon will understand that people's desires can be different.

RESEARCHER:

The more abstract idea is that I could conceive of the world differently than you-- even if I see the same thing, the way I interpret that thing could be different. The way I think about it, the ideas I have about it could be different from the ideas that you have about it. And that seems to be something that doesn't develop until still later, so that our three-year-olds who can understand that you could see something differently from me don't understand that you could represent something differently from me or that you could believe something different about it than I do.

Well, one situation in which you have to understand that the same object could be interpreted or represented in different ways is in something like an ambiguous figure, like the famous duck rabbit.

What is this a picture of? Can you look at this picture? OK, what do you see? What is it a picture of?

CHILD:

A duck.

RESEARCHER:

A duck? OK. Is there anything else this could be a picture of? What else?

CHILD:

A goose.

RESEARCHER:

A what?

CHILD:

A goose.

RESEARCHER:

A goose? OK. Well, you know what else this could be a picture of? It could be a bunny. Can you see a bunny? OK, where would the bunny's-- where are the bunny's ears? There? OK. Where's the duck's beak? There? OK.

So now here's the fun part. Let's look at this picture, and this is a special picture because when you look at it, it might change back and forth from a bunny to a duck.

What we've discovered is that, even when you explain at great length the two different interpretations to young children, say to four-year-olds, they still have a lot of difficulty switching back and forth from one representation to another. And the three- and four-year-olds that we've tested simply say it doesn't switch back and forth from one object to another. They just don't experience multiple representations of the same object, and it's only when they're about five or six that you suddenly start seeing them reacting to these ambiguous figures the same way an adult would and saying, OK, wait a minute. Hey, look. It switched. It looked like a duck, and now it looks like a rabbit.

Our adult conception of the mind deeply depends on the idea that we have these states like beliefs, what philosophers call intentional states, that have this property of referring to the external world but still being able to be different from the external world, being wrong or being opposite to the external world. And that basic idea that you could split up what the world is like and what your mind is telling you about the world, that seems to be something that children are only discovering when they're four or five-years-old.

NARRATOR:

A mind that can understand ambiguous figures can understand that two people can have totally different beliefs about the world. These kids are six-year-old psychologists with their own home-grown theories of mind.