

A Social Psychology Study into the Development of Children's Theory of Mind

The purpose of this study is to examine the childhood development of various "theory of mind" concepts such as mind, emotion, soul, etc. The research and literature on "child's theory of mind" has traditionally focused on psychological approaches, models, and theories. This research strikes out in a different direction - one that pays more attention to social factors involved in developing theories of one's own and others' minds. Instead of the classical "theory of mind," "simulation," and "modularity" approaches common in this research, our approach aims at emphasizing enculturation and social construction. What are the social factors at work as children develop ideas about their own minds and the minds of others? How do these ideas develop and coalesce over time? Methodologically, we propose to explore ways of studying "child's theory of mind" as a phenomenon of society and culture rather than just brains and psychology.

Currently, this study is only in its beginnings. The data and conclusions presented in this website are merely preliminary advances toward the goals indicated above. Therefore, we ask that the reader consider them accordingly.

Methods

Participants for this study were obtained, with parental permission, from Chapparral Elementary School and the Children's School, both of Claremont, CA. Subjects ranged from 4 to 10 years of age and consisted of both sexes, with about 3-4 subjects per age interviewed.

There were two different interview methods used. One we shall call the "drawing method," and the other the "pointing method." Only about half of the child subjects were submitted to both methods of interviewing.

For the drawing method, subjects were asked to draw pictures of a brain, a mind, and a soul. The purpose of this was to obtain a more precise idea of what the children actually understand to be "brain, mind, and soul." Their ease of conducting the drawing tasks gives an idea of how comfortable they are with each idea.

For the pointing method, the subjects were presented with a crude outline of a human figure (see the "pointing data"). They were then asked to point to the location of the head, the feelings, the feet, the brain, the hands, the mind, and the soul of the "person." This method is to provide an idea of children's spatial conception of these ideas of "self" and "other."

Results

[Pointing Method Data and Conclusions](#)

[Drawing Method Data and Conclusions](#)

by Heather Bryan and Dr. Sal Restivo in collaboration with Dr. Joelle Greene (2004)

For further information regarding this website,
please contact Sal Restivo at restis@rpl.edu