How infants and toddlers develop social understanding: The ‘dark ages’ of “theory of mind”

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Abstract

Onishi and Baillargeon’s (2005) infant ‘false belief’ experiment appears to undermine the contemporary belief that the major achievements in social understanding occur late in the preschool years, by showing that infants look longer at a reach which violates their knowledge. In this paper we re-examine Onishi and Baillargeon’s interpretation that infant looking patterns reveal an innate understanding of the mind and the traditional claim that development is theory-like in two sets of studies. We develop Carpendale and Lewis’ (2004) claim for a gradual and social constructivist account of early social understanding. First we look at the infant ‘false belief’ task. In three experiments we analyze the complexities of the procedure and interpret infant looking patterns within an interactional framework in which we distinguish their grasp of shared perspectives on events. Their performance shows clear developments, supporting an account which does not simply rely upon the constraints of an innate module. We then consider two- to three-year olds’ grasp of mental states to argue that these are embedded within a framework of similar interactional constraints. We describe three experiments using narrative and nonverbal techniques to develop an account of early social understanding that is embedded within a relational perspective.