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0521521696 - Infants' Sense of People: Precursors to a Theory of Mind

Maria Legerstee

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Infants' Sense of People

Infants' Sense of People focuses on infants during their first year of life, exploring how they begin to think about other people, their feelings, emotions, and intentions, and how they become aware of these aspects of their own development. Drawing on a broad range of research and developmental theory, Maria Legerstee takes the view that infants have an innate sense of people at birth, which is activated through sympathetic emotions. She questions the idea that infants use physical parameters such as contingencies or motion to distinguish people from objects, and rejects the assumption that infants are mechanical creatures before they become psychological ones. She argues persuasively that before infants learn to speak, interactions with others are possible because infants have a primitive pre-linguistic "Theory of Mind." This accessible book provides a valuable synthesis of current thinking on early social and cognitive development and the origins of Theory of Mind.

MARIA LEGERSTEE is Professor of Psychology at York University, Toronto, where she established the Centre for Infancy Studies in 1991. She has published in journals of developmental psychology and child development.

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Preface

A few years ago I received a call from Sarah Caro, senior editor with Cambridge University Press, who asked me to write a monograph about my research on infants' understanding of people. The timing was opportune as I had concluded various published studies and had several others in progress. I felt it was time to think about how to fit them into a developmental story. I decided to accept Sarah's generous offer.

My work belongs to a somewhat specialized view that (1) proposes that infants have an innate sense of people at birth, which is activated through sympathetic emotions, (2) questions the idea that infants use physical parameters such as contingency or motion to distinguish people from things, and (3) does not accept the assumption that infants are mechanical creatures before they become psychological ones.

This book is the product of twenty years of academic development and family life. Many people have contributed to the way I think about infants and their development. My first (undergraduate) mentor Jean Koepke, with whom I conducted my Honors thesis on neonatal imitation, proposed that it was more rewarding if, in addition to having children, one knew how their mental lives developed. My second mentor and friend, the late Helga Feider, with whom I examined pronoun development and prelinguistic mother–infant interactions, demonstrated how an understanding of mental lives of even very young infants could be examined through communication.

I continued my graduate work on infants' sense of people in the Skinnerian laboratory of Andree Pomerleau and Gerard Malcuit, and with their full support developed a constraint constructivist stance regarding the process of development, combining nativism (innate representations) and active constructivism (redescription of the representations through social interactions). My daughter Johanna and infant son Tor provided, in part, the impetus and case histories for this conviction. The year was 1985.

Since then I have been inspired by the work of various colleagues. In particular, Alan Fogel, Jerome Bruner, Elisabeth Spelke, Andrew

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Meltzoff, Tiffany Field, Colwyn Trevarthen, Daniel Stern, Edward Tronick, Henry Wellman, and John Flavell. They have guided my work as reviewers, commentators, editors, and friends. I hope I have interpreted their theories accurately and borrowed from their ideas appropriately and respectfully.

The most recent influential colleagues are those who have read and critically reviewed parts, or all, of the book: Alan Fogel, whose work has inspired me since my undergraduate studies, Colwyn Trevarthen, and Kurt Fisher. I accept their support and criticism with sincere gratitude but I will be responsible for errors and omissions that remain.

While writing the book, portions of it were also read by students in my Graduate Seminar "Development of Affect, Consciousness, and Social Cognition." Gabriela Markova, Chang Su, Jean Varghese, Tamara Fisher, Edwin Romero, Raluca Barac, Rachel Horton, Jessica Mariano, and Heidi Marsh provided insight through their questions and comments (and also performed some editorial work!). I especially thank Gabriela for reading all the chapters and providing elaborations and examples that helped further clarify what I thought, but did not say.

The studies described in chapters 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10 were developed under my grant "The influence of mothering on social and cognitive competence" (410–2001–0971) from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, Canada. I filmed the infants during a research leave I spent in the Infancy Laboratory of the Junior Scientists at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig, Germany. All the data was then coded and analyzed in my laboratory at York University by various students, in particular Tamara Fisher and Gabriela Markova, except for the study in chapter 9, which was analyzed by staff at the MPI.

I am grateful for the major source of continued financial support from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (Canada). The SSHRC has been invaluable in sustaining my research efforts as a doctoral and post-doctoral student, Canada research fellow, and as Director of the Centre for Infancy Studies at York University.

The year is 2005. My research has continued to support and deepen a constraint constructivist stance; that developmental trajectories that create new and original beings and thinkers are the result of nativism and constructivism. Johanna and Tor continue to confirm this position.