



Exploring babies' and young children's development and learning

Early understanding

Narrator:

Vasu Reddy is Professor of Developmental and Cultural psychology at the University of Portsmouth. We started by asking her about the ways children understand the physical and social features of their immediate world.

Psychologists do tend to separate out how we understand the world and the physical features of the world from the social features of the world. We do kind of think in dichotomies generally I think, it just makes life easier and that's one reason why we tend to separate these two sort of domains of reality. For very many different reasons the physical world and the social world are connected, they're not really different so to give you, a for example, infants, human infants anyway, don't experience the physical world entirely independently of their social world. The things around them are introduced to them, some things in their environment are highlighted for their attention, they're marked out for them, their meanings, their usage, everything comes through how they relate to people. There's some very recent studies looking at four month olds experience of things and not just the way they look at them, but also the way their brains react, and I'm sorry to bring in brains because it looks like kind of an easy fallback to 'this must be real' and I don't mean that, but how their behaviour and neurologically they respond differently to things in their environment that other people have looked at, as opposed to things that other people haven't looked at, and they respond to things that are new to those other people differently than things that were old to those other people. So it's going to be a really very close relationship between how we respond to the physical world and what our relationships with people influence us as being, and it works the other way as well, so if you can imagine your physical relationships in an environment where you're stuck in a flat with people, as opposed to have lots of outdoors to go to, your relationships are inevitably different, so the two are connected.

Vasu went on to explain how Piaget's work on infants' understanding of the physical world relates to her research and thinking about infancy.

Vasu:

Piaget was a wonderful observer of infants' perceptions of bits and pieces of their physical world. I've not yet come across such sensitive descriptions and longitudinally following them through to see how the infants are learning from one day's experience to the next day, and in that sense Piaget's legacy for psychology ought to have been to encourage us to actually go out and observe our infants more and to actually be confident about the quality of these observations, a kind of a clinical approach and it's wonderful, I think, that part of it is wonderful. The priority for Piaget seems to have been how infants understand physical reality very, very much more than social reality so even in his observations of, let's say an infant who's watching a ball roll along, his perceptions were all about the infant's observations of the ball, not about what somebody else sitting beside that infant might have been saying to encourage the infant, or to draw the infant into pushing the ball more, sort of, which most of the time in our everyday realities you can't separate them, the mother's voice or somebody else's encouragement in pushing and pulling is intertwined with how we look at the specific reality, and there are a couple of examples in his descriptions of very sensitive observations of how infants are experimenting, for example, with funny sounds or with funny actions on another person's cheek, but almost as if the other person did not at all respond and therefore influence how the infant then understood it or what the infant made of it, so I think one legacy that Piaget has given to psychology's understanding of physical reality is there's a hell of a lot of action which is important in the infant's understanding of the world so he emphasised action, that was wonderful.

Narrator:

We asked Vasu to give her perspective on the influence of research into children's theory of mind on views about infant social abilities.

Vasu:

I think in one sense there's an interesting parallel between the effect that the theory of mind revolution, if you like, has had on psychology and the effect that Piagetian theory had on psychology, and the similarity is that psychologists like hypotheses, they like having neat little hypotheses to test, challenge or return to, and both Piagetian theory and the theory of mind theory, or the theory theory, had been absolutely rich in giving people lots of things to say this is daft or yes it's true, or no it's true but it's only two months earlier that it happened or two years earlier, and so on, so it's kind of like set up an industry and that's kind of not a very, not a very admirable aspect of why we've taken these up. It's had an enormous effect, the theory of mind on developmental psychology, the theory of mind theory. The problem I think is also similar in a sense between some of the assumptions the theory of mind theory makes, and some of the Piagetian assumptions, they both see the child as observers of some aspects of reality, observers who are primarily intellectual machines, making inferences, making deductions, working things out, and sometimes it's quite explicit in the theory of mind theory theorists' writing which is that their hypothesis is testing creatures, and then they have auxiliary hypotheses, and other kind of areas, it's evident even in the title of the theory. There's a number of problems with that, to put it very simply the main problem with that is that most organisms aren't here to intellectualise, we're here to live, and living is to do with engaging and our knowing is very much part of our engaging and relating to our realities, and this kind of idea that individuals are solitary beings cognising the world is a complete distortion of how we come to know, i.e. what are our influences and what is contained within our knowledge.

One of the points I've been making about what's wrong with the theory theory approach is the conception of mind that has been adopted, not only by the theory clinic, but quite a large part of psychology, and this is a conception of mind where mind is defined as something that is hidden behind the surface of an organism's being and activity and body, this is a kind of an almost straight Cartesian interpretation of what mind is. Now psychology as most scientists rejected the Cartesian idea of a mind-body dualism but hasn't rejected, has forgotten to reject if you like, one implication of mind-body dualism which is that if mind is hidden inside then it cannot be seen, it's a different kind of substance and if the only access that you have to it is through inference. Now Descartes said well that inference could be wrong and you never could guess it, and modern psychology has more or less taken that part of it on board and has accepted that hidden-ness assumption. Now if you translate this into how any organism gets to know another organism, how infants get to know other people or, indeed, how psychologists get to know their subjects, you have a problem because if minds are completely hidden you have no access except through educated guesswork, you never really know, and so psychology is in a kind of really peculiar position of being a science about something that it cannot quite be sure about, and when it comes to infants the practical theoretical implications of this approach have been to draw a big line between when infants become capable of inferring the existence of hidden entities, and prior to which they are assumed to not be able to make such inferences which creates a kind of a divide between infants who perceive other people as moving objects, complex behavioural things, and toddlers maybe or children maybe who perceive other people as people who are moving with minds behind them making them move.

I think drawing this dualism between mind and behaviour, whilst rejecting the dualism between mind and body is logically daft, because if you accept that mind and body are fundamentally connected and concordant it becomes very difficult to say that behaviour is something pretty much completely separate from that body that's fundamentally connected and that behaviour is not concordant with mind. We can make that assumption but making that assumption leads us into all sorts of problems such as you never can get to mind except through behaviour so, or you never can get to expression as being related to the state of a body, for example. You get to two kind of different entities and the arguments against thinking of mind and behaviour as two entities, two different entities, have been made in philosophy many times. I think the way I would prefer to see them is to see behaviour as a kind of, to see

mind as the way in which a body moves, is the manner of behaviour, if you like, is what a body does and how it does it, that's your mindedness, if you like, and it brings mind very much back into the fold of relatability and, to some extent, observability.