



## Exploring babies' and young children's development and learning

### *Teasing and deception*

#### **Narrator:**

Vasu Reddy is Professor of Developmental and Cultural psychology at the University of Portsmouth. She discusses the background to her paper *Getting Back to the Rough Ground: Deception and Social Living*.

#### **Vasu:**

I became interested in teasing because, because I was making a video for a class on language development, of my daughter who was just nearly nine months old, and so I was just kind of filming family mealtimes and just any old engagement that I could, and I captured this interaction which at the time we all called it teasing and it was nothing remarkable, but on watching it and on reading a bit more about it, it was very puzzling because it, it was stuff that in the context of the theory of mind theory which was just beginning at that time, the late '80's and early '90's, shouldn't have been happening because it's basically kids mucking about with other people's intentions. I know you want me to do that, I'm not going to do that, I'm going to do this, and let's see what you're going to react. Now at nine months that shouldn't be possible, okay, according to what the theory was saying at that time, so that was one reason why it was interesting. And other reason why it was interesting was because I was intrigued by how infants well before, say 9-10 month old infants, seemed to grasp the meaning of gestures, like gestures like here, I'm offering this to you, holding an object out, offering it to you, and then as you're about to reach out for it, whipping it back, which was the bit I videoed. How similar this was to the kind of pretending with objects that doesn't happen until the middle of the second year so, in a sense what you could argue is happening here is infants get a meaning of a gesture and then muck about with that meaning, impose a 'yes, but I'm only doing this to play' meaning. In the middle of the second year you get this, but you get it with objects. Here is a pen cap and I'm going to pretend it's a sweetie now, that's probably a daft example but if you get my meaning, and this seems to be happening a good nine months earlier this mucking about with the meanings of gestures, of interpersonal understandings, than with the meanings of objects, it's kind of intriguing from those two different points of view. I have a feeling that my personal history of teasing is that people only do it when they really like you, that's the kind of intimacy thing, and of course you can have a million different kinds of teasing, and teasing can be nasty and cruel, but that kind of playful teasing, it for me is both a sign of affection if you like, and leads to further closeness because you're breaking down boundaries between people. It happens a lot more in India where I come from, I think, and is seen more positively there so that's probably the real reason I tune into it.

#### **Narrator:**

Vasu went on to talk about some very practical research issues.

#### **Vasu:**

One of the difficulties of studying phenomena like teasing and deception is that they happen in very familiar contexts, they happen at times when the infant is confident and they're kind of rare, they're not that rare, but they're rare if you go in with a camera and want to film it, in one of my very first studies of teasing I was doing all sorts of things, I was interviewing parents and I was taking these video cameras weekly or fortnightly in that first study into parents' homes to look at changes and the babies, and in one particular case I remember the mother told me look, look, look, she's just started doing this, every time we put the TV on she actually scoots over there in her walker and stands in front of the TV and beams at us because she knows we're going to say oh, you devil, come away from there, we want to watch the TV. Right, I said, that's fine, I'll set the camera up on a tripod in the entrance to the sitting room and I'll keep out of the way so I don't influence anything, and you just sit there and you switch the TV on, and you just kind of be natural, okay. Now teasing is one of those funny things; what the child is doing is playing with what you want, if you like, that's one kind of teasing.

Anyway so I did this, I went into the kitchen, the mother sat there and all that happened on the video is the camera was on, the mother was in the sitting room looking eagerly wanting her kid to come in front of the TV, the kid went, she was I don't know, eight or nine months old, she went in her walker to a corner of a familiar sitting room to a chest of drawers and played around with a handle of the chest of drawers' drawers. It was a wonderful example of how setting up this up by pretending to want something that you really want is, you know, it doesn't work so it's difficult, I mean we have got stuff on film but these kinds of examples the primary source of data is using parents as observers, you know getting them to use Dictaphones and record into it all, getting them to write or getting them to 'phone you the moment something like that happens, and that does work and that's kind of how we've collected most of these examples.

**Vasu:**

We've done two or three studies I think where we've been using parents as observers for us. We've given parents Dictaphones and got them to record into it, speak into it whenever event, which they think might be relevant, happen. What we wanted from parents was like verbatim day to day detailed descriptions of events, not judgements about what does this mean, we kind of question them and discuss the background to it later, and in order to do that we often gave them a kind of, like an index card with if something like this happens, talk about it, talk about what happened just before, talk about where the child was looking, talk about what you said/did before/after etcetera so kind of cues as to what to talk about.

**Narrator:**

Next, we asked Vasu to talk about the origins of infants' social abilities.

**Vasu:**

I'm really, really keen on the importance of engagement in drawing out intersubjective abilities in the infant, and in fact in drawing out intersubjective abilities and realities in the people that the infants engage with, I think it's a really important thing that these things aren't in existence in a prefigured kind of way. However as always there's this kind of funny paradox where if you were not tuned in to engagement you wouldn't pick these up and you wouldn't have the engagement, so if you were not tuned in to being into intersubjective it wouldn't mean anything to you from birth, so empirically you've got huge amounts of evidence now from infants minutes old that they are at the very least tuned in to what other people are doing enough to want to make them do it themselves a lot of the time, and even enough to want them, to make them want to provoke it if those things that people are doing aren't coming back again. And there's even stuff from at least infants of a few days' old that they are already differentiating between people who look at them and people who don't look, faces which are looking directly at them and faces which are, which have their eyes averted to the side, and it's kind of like fantastic discrimination skills and fantastic sensitivities to the facial expressions, to the voices and this is even in utero that infants are sensitive to what their mothers are saying and including sort of subtle differences between one poem and another that's being read to them, and so on, so there's all this kind of equipment, if you like, on being tuned into people's communicative actions.

**Narrator:**

How do Vasu's views relate to those of other psychologists working in the same field?

**Vasu:**

I think the view I have been putting forward is very similar to the views expressed by Colwyn Trevarthen and Peter Hobson and people at, who have emphasised a very early intersubjective capacity. The thing that I'm probably doing which is slightly more pronounced in the way I've said it is differentiating between theories of intersubjective capacities where, which focus on either coming to understand other people through your own experience of being a person, you might call them a first person perspective on other minds, right, I understand you because I know what it's like to be a mind, and those theorists who argue for third person perspective on understanding of the minds which could be something like I understand you because look I've been watching you and I'm inferring that this is what's driving you and this is what you're doing, and therefore there must be something that's making you do it. The argument that I've been putting forward in direct challenge to the

claims that there is either a first person or a third person perspective on understanding minds and the bringing first person and third person perspectives together is the challenge for infants is no, what infants start off with, and if they don't they really are handicapped, is the ability to gain meaning from second person relations, in other words other minds become real to you, and in fact your own mind becomes real to you, not because you experience something and know it, not because you watch it, but because you are in engagement with somebody who's directly interacting with you. In other words you have an engagement, you have a relation where you are an 'I' and the other person is a 'you' and vice versa, and if you don't have this, the meaning of those things that we call mind or mental states has to be different. If you don't have it you can't have such a good lead in to either understanding yourself or understanding other people, and I think that's kind of something that hasn't been taken on in psychology very, very much, it's been around in lots of different guises but not really developed, and obviously it has, it isn't for psychologists because if the psychologists are sitting there trying to understand minds, hey wait a minute, what are you doing, either introspecting or sitting behind a one-way mirror in a laboratory, go out there and accept that relation is what draws out mind knowledge.

**Narrator:**

We asked Vasu to give her perspective on Professor Mike Tomasello's ideas about the development of shared understanding and shared intentions.

**Vasu:**

I think one of the things that Mike Tomasello bases his theory on is this assumption of an individual infant cognising other individual minds and he puts communicative intentions, for example, as of a very different kind of intention from ordinary intentions, basically looking at communicative intentions as a mind to mind communication and, again, adopting this idea that minds are inside the head and hidden and if from your mind want communication with another's mind you've got to kind of work out this, the existence of this hidden entity and want not just to move towards, for example to reach towards a physical object in the world, but actually deliver an intention to be picked up by another intentional being, right, so as is common with much of the theory theory approaches, although Mike Tomasello's view is different in some ways. One of the things that's key to the development of communication for him as well is that there should be a kind of an intentional object which is separate from the intender and the intended recipient of the communication, in other words I imagine a thing, I want to talk to you about that thing and I have to be able to be capable of knowing that you can imagine that thing, which isn't visible.

One of the differences that I would have with Mike's position is that he sees, in line with much of the theory theory kind of approaches, that representing these hidden entities, a representational capacity is prior to and necessary for any kind of genuine communicative or understanding act, and I would actually prefer to put the direction of arrows in the other way, in other words that it is action and an awareness which is implicit in the action, which could lead to a representation post hoc of what it is you were actually sensibly interacting about, rather than some kind of a conceptual effectively representation leading to sensible action. I think this is a really crucial difference and I think one of the sort of fundamental problems I have with the theory approach is that you say that the theory is necessary to act, theory or some other form of representational capacity, and I'm saying look, it's your ability to act sensibly which leads to you developing the theory, I mean look this is evident in all our adult interactions as well, theories come after the fact, you know, we understand people, we understand stuff that's going on, your theory crystallises that understanding, it does make a difference but it does make a difference at some later point, it doesn't lead to your initial understanding, it can't.

I think drawing the clear divide between relational explanations of any phenomenon and cognitive explanations of any phenomenon which is the case, this divide exists, drawing such a divide is probably, it's a very, very unsatisfactory state of affairs, it depends really on how you define cognition, so if you define cognition as something that's happening in the head and something that's happening in an individual head, in other words if you define cognition as something outside of embodied interaction, i.e. relation, then you've got a problem, you've got this divide and you're stuck with it. But if we could redefine cognition I think we're going to

have to do this, if we could redefine cognition as something very much more fluid for a start, so that it is not fixed representations leading to actions but something that is constantly being re-described to use, to use Annette Karmiloff-Smith's term, we might end up not only with bridging this gap between cognitive explanations and relational explanations, but actually a more proper understanding of how cognition works.