Differentiation through engagement: my understanding of the role of emotional connectedness in the development of children’s understanding of minds

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In this paper, I give an account of my developing understanding of how children develop an understanding of themselves and others as psychological beings, with minds, desires and beliefs. Rejecting the theory of mind explanations, which situate the development of an understanding of minds in individualistic processes, I come to understand understanding from a relational perspective, which emphasises the social context of the emergence of children’s understanding. The relational account acknowledges that significant others are crucial not only because they create an environment which enables children’s understanding of minds to emerge, but also because they inspire such a development. Research into facial imitation in newborns has shown that from birth, babies have a sense that they are like other people. This sense of being like other human beings compels them to engage with others. Through engagement, babies are drawn into the actions and attitudes of others and gradually come to realise that the world has meaning for others. Conscious awareness that people have different perspectives on the world emerges as babies come to separate out their own attitudes from the attitudes of others. I conclude that this awareness, which is a product of emotional connectedness, forms the foundation of an understanding of minds.

Key words: understanding, understanding of minds, theory of mind, emotional engagement

When I first began this foray into the murky depths of the origins of children’s understanding of minds, I soon came to realise that there were no easy answers to be found. I discovered there were multiple, conflicting accounts of how children come to understand that they, and others, are psychological beings, with thoughts, feelings and intentions. It appeared that to deepen my understanding of children’s understanding, I would have to delve into the different accounts and decide which arguments seemed most credible. First, though, I needed to establish what people mean when they refer to an ‘understanding of minds’ and I needed to clarify babies’ starting-state.

According to Lee and Homer (1999), there are three assumptions which are fundamental to an adult understanding of minds, or what they term ‘a commonsense theory of mind’. To understand minds, an individual must understand that people have minds, that the mind comprises various mental states, and that there are causal links between people’s minds, the outside world, and actions.
In contrast, Piaget’s (1929 in Wellman, 1990, p.5) portrayal of the newborn baby conveys an existence devoid of such understanding:

Let us imagine a being, knowing nothing of the distinction between mind and body...
His notions of self would undoubtedly be much less clear than ours. Compared with us he would experience much less the sensation of the thinking self within him, the feeling of a being independent of the external world.

This image of the newborn, undifferentiated from others and the world, has a number of implications. Piaget is suggesting that babies do not realise that they have a mind, and consequently, do not have the capacity to think about things. Equally, they do not realise that other people have minds, and thus, do not understand that people have desires, intentions and beliefs which govern the way they behave. In this essay I describe how I explored, and attempted to understand, how children develop from this relative lack of differentiation into thinking beings who understand minds.

My first port of call was a substantial body of research conducted under the title of ‘theory of mind’ (Carpendale & Lewis, 2006). The phrase ‘theory of mind’ covers three different perspectives on how children come to understand minds: theory-theory, innate module theory and simulation theory (Carpendale & Lewis, 2004). Theory-theory claims that children formulate theories to explain mental states. Their understanding is theory-like because it is coherent and undergoes significant paradigm shifts (ibid.). Innate module theory contends that children are born with hard-wired theories which are triggered at some point during development (ibid.). Simulation theory maintains that children develop an understanding of minds through introspection (ibid.). Each of these different theories seemed to have its merits but critics of the theory of mind tradition have highlighted a number of fundamental shortcomings of the approach.

Theory of mind research has tended to focus on the ‘landmark’ emergence of children’s understanding of beliefs which is thought to occur at around four or five years of age (Carpendale & Lewis, 2006). For proponents of this approach, ‘false belief’ tests are considered the ‘litmus test’ of children’s theory of mind (Lee & Homer, 1999). Dunn (1988) draws attention to the stark contrast between the findings of theory of mind research, which suggest that young children have limited social understanding until school-age and the abundance of research on the first months of life which highlights the sensitivity of babies to the moods and actions of other people. Chandler, too, (1988 in Carpendale & Lewis, 2006) has criticised the theory of mind tradition for focusing too narrowly on developments around the fourth birthday. It seems that theory of mind researchers’ fixation on the emergence of children’s false belief understanding has led to a narrowly defined and somewhat distorted view of what it means to have an understanding of minds. Much theory of mind literature does little to inform our understanding of the developments which precede children’s understanding of beliefs and false beliefs. The development of children’s understanding of other mental states such as feelings, interests and desires is surely also worthy of investigation. Moreover, such a focus on the emergence of a conscious understanding of minds suggests that babies’ innate understanding of minds is undeserving of attention.

Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that false belief tests underestimate children’s capabilities. Siegal and Beattie (1991 in Mitchell, 2003) and Lewis and Osbourne (1990 in Mitchell, 2003) found that children’s performance in false belief tests was often hindered by the wording of the questions. Lee and Homer (1999) highlight that false belief tasks require children to understand, and accurately use, words such as “think” and “know”; however, the
correct use of these words is dependent on having some understanding of the mind. Moreover, younger children have been found to demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of minds in their natural environment; children as young as two and a half have been found to have an understanding of false beliefs in the home, for example by using deception tactics (Carpendale & Lewis, 2004). It seems that false belief tests may not even provide entirely accurate or meaningful data about children’s understanding of beliefs. It seems to me that there must be a better approach to addressing the issue of how children come to understand minds.

Carpendale and Lewis (2004) argue that theory of mind explanations of the development of understanding, which focus on individualistic processes such as inference, maturation and theory formation, fail to take into account the influence of the social environment on children’s cognitive development. They assert that “a common problem with the dominant perspectives in the field is that each focuses upon the cognitive architecture of mental state reasoning, without reflecting upon the social landscape in which such reasoning is constructed” (p.11). Carpendale and Lewis (2004, 2006) are among a growing number of academics who place children’s interactions with other people at the centre of children’s development of an understanding of minds (Dunn, 1988; Gopnik et al., 2001; Hobson, 2002; Gerhardt, 2004; Rochat, 2004).

Human beings are dependent on one another for survival, and consequently evolution has supplied us with social skills which maximise our survival chances (Gopnik et al., 2001). Babies, who are particularly vulnerable due to their lack of physical strength and motor control, are highly social beings (Dunn, 1988; Gerhardt, 2004). Indeed, Hobson (2002) suggests that the connectedness of babies to other people distinguishes human beings from other creatures. According to Rochat (2004, p.277, original emphasis), “an inescapable fact that any psychological theory should be built on is the fact that individuals live and develop for and through others”. Rochat is suggesting not only that children develop an understanding of minds through other people, but also that relations with other people provide the motivation for such development. He proposes that “infants’ psychological development is shaped around the innate drive to promote fusion and intimacy with others” (p.278, original emphasis). This suggests that babies’ development can only be understood within the context of the social system in which they live and grow (Gerhardt, 2004). These arguments convince me that only relational accounts, which recognise that children develop an understanding of minds through interaction with others, can provide a solution to the understanding of minds conundrum.

Piaget’s description of the newborn baby illustrated that newborns lack a clear understanding of the distinction between self, others and the world (Carpendale & Lewis, 2006). However, newborns are not utterly undifferentiated from the external world (Gergely, 2002). Gergely (ibid., p.27) states that “researchers have uncovered a number of objective information sources and innate perceptual mechanisms that allow for the differentiation of the physical or ‘ecological’ self”. From birth, babies perceive their physical separateness from the world around them (Rochat, 2004); they can discriminate between the touch of others and self-produced touch, paying more attention to the touch of others (ibid.). Some believe that this sense of differentiation is a product of prenatal learning. According to Rochat, this perceived sense of self is the first step in babies’ emerging awareness of self and other, and indeed, their developing understanding of minds.

The relational approach posits that human intersubjectivity gives rise to the differentiation of self and other, and, consequently, the development of an understanding of minds (Carpendale & Lewis, 2006). From birth, babies show a particular interest in people; they orient
themselves towards people, focusing their attention on faces and voices, rather than other objects and sounds (Gopnik et al., 2001). Within a matter of days, they come to recognise the faces, voices and smells of familiar people (ibid.). Babies seem to have a superficial understanding that people are people. Moreover, from birth, babies are emotionally engaged with other people. I have felt this emotional engagement with babies, the warm buzz of human affinity upon looking into their eyes. Just as we identify with babies, it seems that babies identify with us (ibid.). Babies are not empty vessels or tabulae rasae, they are born with the knowledge that they are like other human beings. Meltzoff’s ‘like me’ hypothesis holds that babies are born with an instinctive understanding of others which stems from ‘innate assumptions’ about people having minds as well as bodies (ibid.). Hobson (2002) suggests that babies know that people are indeed people because they offer emotional interchange. Gopnik et al. (2001, p.24, original emphasis) claim that “quite literally from the moment we first see other people, we see them as people”.

This view is supported by findings on newborn babies’ ability to imitate facial and hand movements. To imitate the facial movement of another, babies must recognise that they have a face like other people (Gopnik et al., 2001), and match their own unseen physical movements with the perceived action of another person (Meltzoff & Moore, 1999a). Meltzoff and Moore (1999b, p.154) stress that “it becomes tempting to hypothesize that the foundation for developing an ‘understanding of mind’ may be grounded in the initial equivalence of ‘self’ and ‘other’ manifest by early imitation”.

Carpendale and Lewis (2004, p.14) criticise Meltzoff’s ‘like me’ approach, arguing that “analogical reasoning is possible once children have the concept of self and other, but the argument presupposes this distinction and thus cannot logically be its source”. Carpendale and Lewis seem to be suggesting that having the capacity to identify with others is synonymous with having a ‘concept of self and other’. On the contrary, it seems to me that newborn babies’ innate ‘feeling’ of being like other people is quite different from the abstract, conscious concept of self and other which develops in later childhood. Hobson (2002, p.252) agrees that “to react to other people as persons is the foundation for understanding minds, but concepts about the mind still have to be built upon these foundations”. The newborn’s understanding is, at this stage, instinctive and unconscious.

Recent research into the existence of mirror neurons provides further backing for the argument that babies possess an innate capacity to identify with other people (Motluk, 2001). Studies by neuropsychologists have found that “when we observe another person’s facial expressions, our premotor response, triggered by our own motor neurons, produces in us the emotional state that we have learned to associate with these expressions” (Parker-Rees, 2007a, p.38). The implications of this discovery are that the brain makes little distinction between self and other, and consequently, human beings can understand each other through unconscious simulation (Carpendale & Lewis, 2006). Hobson (2002) asserts that babies are able to perceive emotions because they are visible; they are evident in body language, facial expressions and tone of voice. Mirror neurons could explain how emotions resonate between people, creating a direct link between minds and enabling babies to identify with other human beings. Whatever the physiological basis, it is evident that “from the earliest months of life, infants are highly attuned to other people” (Hobson, ibid., p.43).

It appears that evolution has ensured babies have plenty of opportunity to benefit from their interest in people. Newborn babies are nearsighted, with an optimal focus of around thirty centimetres; in brief, they are perfectly adapted to focus on the faces of those who hold them (Gopnik et al., 2001). In addition, newborn babies’ limited motor control makes them highly dependent on their caregivers, ensuring they have ample time to become attuned to those who
care for them (Parker-Rees, 2007a). Babies capitalise on their time with people, and their innate ability to empathise with them, by engaging in communication (ibid.). According to Parker-Rees (ibid., p.38), initially “communication is… a form of communing which serves to establish and maintain relationships and which is enjoyed for its own sake”.

Parker-Rees (2007b, p.5) highlights how adults are drawn to engage with babies:

> Perhaps as a result of our heightened ability to infer what other people know, think and believe, we have evolved a powerful predisposition to enjoy communing with babies, especially our own, in ways which go beyond the protective care shown by other species.

By treating them as psychological beings, adults support babies in developing an understanding of people (Newson & Newson, 1975 in Carpendale & Lewis, 2006). Indeed, by directing our attention towards babies, talking to them as if they understand our words, using gestures and facial expressions to communicate our meaning, and responding to their contributions, adults must unconsciously create conditions which are favourable for the emergence of an understanding of minds.

Just as babies imitate others, familiar others imitate babies (Parker-Rees, 2007b). This imitation serves several functions. The contingent but magnified nature of the adult’s responses helps babies to identify communication which is directed towards them, and marks it out as something of interest by emphasising its ‘like-me’ qualities. Moreover, imitation demonstrates to babies that their partner is interested in them. Parker-Rees (ibid., p.8) suggests that “for most people, being ‘liked’ or imperfectly imitated by a communication partner is emotionally rewarding”. Furthermore, the exaggerated behaviour of adults acts as a ‘social mirror’ which reflects back, and draws attention to, babies' actions and vocalisations (Parker-Rees, 2007a). Although these early interactions are asymmetrical (ibid.), with the adult taking responsibility for coordinating the turn-taking (Schaffer, 2003), they are entirely mutual.

Babies use their basic but powerful social skills to engage meaningfully in interaction with other people. They monitor the facial expressions and tones of voice of others and modulate their behaviour in response to their mood and level of arousal (Gerhardt, 2004). According to Hobson (2002, p.39), “even small infants have an organized mental life, and this mental life is expressed in behaviour that is innately fashioned to coordinate with the social behaviour of other people”. Rochat (2004) claims that from around two months of age, when the first social smile appears, babies begin to ‘seduce’ other people. Similarly, Gopnik et al. (2001) suggest that babies’ coordination of their emotional expressions is ‘flirting’. I have experienced this flirtation or seduction with babies, and it is an extremely compelling incentive to participate in further interaction. Babies use expressions of interest, delight and excitement to reward their partner for their attention (Parker-Rees, 2007b). In this way, babies shape their interactions with other people, just as adults shape their interactions with babies (ibid.). Interactions are clearly a source of enjoyment for baby and caregiver alike. Meltzoff (2005 in ibid.) suggests that the ‘social-game quality’ of interaction between baby and a familiar other is mutually rewarding. Babies and familiar others certainly take pleasure in “delightful conversations fuelled by mutual enjoyment of generously shared interest” (Parker-Rees, 2007b, p.7)

These interactions, which are key to the development of an understanding of minds, are driven by the innate feeling of connectedness which babies share with others. This sense of connectedness motivates babies to engage with people, and, equally, compels adults to engage with babies. It is, according to Hobson (2002), the prerequisite to an understanding of minds.
Through recurring patterns of engagement with familiar others, babies begin to develop expectations of their interactions with people. Piaget believed that babies construct ‘affective schemes’ which consist of “sensorimotor, lived, practical knowledge about people based on expectations acquired through experience of how parents respond” (Carpendale & Lewis, 2004, p.28). Gerhardt (2004, p.24) concurs that “expectations of other people and how they will behave are inscribed in the brain outside conscious awareness, in the period of infancy”. Failure to have their expectations met is distressing to babies. Murray and Trevarthen (1985 in Hobson, 2002) found that when their mother’s responses were delayed by thirty seconds, causing a lack of synchronicity in their communication, two month old babies became withdrawn and anxious. Moreover, Tronick et al. (1978 in Hobson, 2002) found that babies seek to re-establish engagement when it ceases by smiling at their partner. These experiments demonstrate how, through experience of interacting with people, young babies have already come to hold certain assumptions about people. Hobson (2002, p.59, original emphasis) stresses that “it is through emotional connectedness that a baby discovers the kind of thing a person is. A person is the kind of thing with which one can feel and share things, and the kind of thing with which one can communicate”. Consequently, babies find it disturbing when they fail to engage with others in the way they have come to expect.

At around four months of age, babies’ gross motor control improves, allowing them to explore the world around them (Parker-Rees, 2007a). This newfound freedom is complemented by improved manual dexterity (Schaffer, 2003). As a result, a new world of objects opens up for babies. Gopnik et al. (2001, p.35) suggest that this shift in babies’ focus “leads to a deeper commonality and communication with other people”. The relationship between baby and familiar other takes on new depth as they turn outwards to face the world together (Gopnik et al., 2001).

From around nine months of age, babies begin to share experiences of the world with others as they “discover that their emotional rapport with other people extends to a set of joint attitudes toward the world” (Gopnik et al., 2001, p.34). Hobson claims that emotional engagement draws babies into experiencing other people’s ‘relatedness’ to the world, making shared attention possible (Carpendale & Lewis, 2006). According to Carpendale and Lewis (2004), babies begin to understand that joint attention behaviours, at first merely imitations of others’ actions, have meaning and communicative value. They come to realise that their gestures, initially simply a feature of their connections with objects, have an impact on other people and begin to use them to control people’s attention (Parker-Rees, 2007a). They start to point out things to other people and understand that other people’s pointing has a meaning (Schaffer, 2003). They come to realise that other people are aware of things (Hobson, 2002) and consequently begin to request things, offer things and follow the gaze of others. They look to others to check if an event or object is safe. They are learning that the world has meaning for others, and start to attend to the meaning which other people ascribe to objects and events (Parker-Rees, 2007a).

According to Hobson (2002), babies are initially drawn into adopting the attitudes and actions of other people, unaware that they are taking on other people’s perspectives. Hobson argues that babies have an innate propensity to be emotionally moved by the actions and attitudes of others. His ‘differentiating out’ approach posits that “infants can respond to others’ attitudes without yet having a conception of what these attitudes are” (Carpendale & Lewis, 2006, p.91). Gradually, as babies find themselves reacting to others’ attitudes and actions, they begin to realise that other people have different perspectives. This seems reasonable; as adults, we are moved to adopt the mannerisms, accents and viewpoints of other people, especially those we like, before realising we are even doing so. Carpendale and Lewis (2004)
concur that children’s understanding of minds emerges in action rather than in thought. They assert that “children’s initial, fragile social understanding, or “understanding-in-action”, is at first evident when supported by social interaction” (p.25).

Through learning that the world can be ‘shared’ with other people, babies gradually develop a sense of differentiation from others and, ultimately, an understanding of minds. Hobson (2002) uses the relatedness triangle to explain how this process occurs (see Appendix A). He believes that by being moved by another person’s stance on the world, babies are pulled towards the position of the other person. After repeated experiences of adopting a different perspective on a fixed world, they begin to realise that the world has separate meanings for different people. In this way, conscious awareness that other people have perspectives emerges gradually as babies come to separate out their attitudes from those of others. As a result, “the infant is no longer embedded in a one-track, for-me mode of experiencing reality” (Hobson. 2002, p.93). This shift in mental orientation gives babies an insight into the nature of minds and paves the way for the emergence of thought.

Because of their ability to empathise with people, babies first learn that people have different desires. As Hobson (2002) stressed, emotions are visible, and thus, perceivable. The shift in children’s understanding of desires, which takes place during the second year, is evident from the crackers and broccoli experiment (Gopnik et al. 2001). During the experiment, the researcher tasted crackers and raw broccoli, showing either delight or disgust after eating each one, before asking the baby to give her some. Whereas fourteen month old babies assumed that the researcher would like the same thing as them and gave the food they preferred (the crackers in every case), eighteen month olds gave the researcher the food for which she had expressed a preference.

This newfound awareness of others’ feelings during the second year is apparent in a number of new behaviours. Children start to show signs of distress when they witness arguments between other people (Dunn, 1988). They also begin to show empathy and offer comfort when others are distressed, demonstrating their awareness of how people feel and how to make them better (Gopnik et al., 2001). Conversely, the ‘Terrible Twos’ are also evidence of children’s burgeoning understanding of people’s desires. Gopnik et al. (2001, p.38) assert that, during the Terrible Twos, “toddlers are systematically testing the dimensions on which their desires and the desires of others may be in conflict”. Towards the end of the second year, children also begin to talk about their own feelings, and the feelings of other people (Dunn, 1988). Crucially, they demonstrate an understanding of causal links in their talk about internal psychological states and emotions (Bretherton & Beeghley, 1982 in Wellman 1990). In contrast, reference to thoughts and beliefs emerges in children’s language during the third year (Dunn, 1988).

As children learn that other people have different desires, they begin to realise that people see things from different perspectives (Gopnik et al., 2001). In an experiment in which children were asked to hide a toy out of the sight of the researcher, who was sat opposite them behind a screen, three year olds correctly placed the toy within their own view, but out of the view of the researcher (ibid.). However, at age three, children do not seem to understand that having a different perspective influences people’s actions, and hence, they routinely fail false belief tests (ibid.).

Wellman (1990), a proponent of the theory-theory explanation of children’s understanding of mind, believed that children develop an understanding of beliefs after they develop an understanding of desires. He makes the distinction between desires, which are the product of emotions and physiological states, and beliefs, which result from perceptions. He suggests that two year olds use simple desire psychology to explain and predict human actions;
consequently, children of this age often fail belief reasoning tasks but pass desire reasoning tasks. According to Wellman, belief psychology naturally emerges from desire psychology because of the shortcomings of reasoning based on desires. Desire psychology cannot explain, for example, why two people with the same desire take two different courses of action. Consequently, he argues that “the construct of belief must be constructed out of a notion of desire” (p.232). Although I do not subscribe to the view that children formulate theories to explain people’s actions – it seems far too arduous to have to refer to a set of theories to work out why someone is behaving the way they are – it stands to reason that children first develop an understanding of desires, because desires stem from emotions which are manifest in people. It also makes sense that an understanding of beliefs emerges from an understanding of desires.

Carpendale and Lewis (2004) use Chapman’s (1991) epistemic or ‘knowing’ triangle, similar in many ways to Hobson’s relatedness triangle, to explain how children learn that people have beliefs. They assert that through interaction with other people, children learn that people hold different beliefs about the world. Because the world is fixed and stable, children have to find an explanation for the variation in beliefs, and thus develop an understanding of how beliefs work. Carpendale and Lewis (2004, p.12) suggest that “at some point children realize that access to information, for example through seeing, is essential in the formation of beliefs”. Once children realise that in addition to having different feelings about the world, people have different perceptions of the world, they can apprehend that there are multiple versions of reality which result in different beliefs.

Relational approaches acknowledge that the emergence of an understanding of minds varies according to the type of interaction children experience. This assumption is borne out by research. For example, a body of research has established that children with older siblings tend to fare better in false belief tests (Carpendale & Lewis, 2004). Gopnik et al. (2001) suggest that siblings play a crucial role in the baby’s developing understanding of minds because they actively emphasise the differences between their desires and those of the baby. Carpendale and Lewis (2004, p.26) seem to take a similar view on the importance of disagreement:

> It is through becoming aware of other people’s beliefs and coordinating these often differing perspectives with their own beliefs that children develop an understanding of mind... It is partially the resistance or refractoriness of social interaction that stimulates the development of knowledge.

Moreover, Gopnik et al. (2001) highlight that the desire to coerce siblings into doing what you want is a strong incentive to work out how people work.

Research has also shown that children who are securely attached are more competent at theory of mind tasks than children who have less secure attachments (Carpendale & Lewis, 2004). Meins (1999) proposes that securely attached children are more successful at these tests because their parents responded more sensitively and appropriately to them as babies. She also suggests that the parents of securely attached parents tend to be more “mindminded”, treating their children as psychological beings and exposing them to talk about the mind (Carpendale & Lewis, 2004). These findings emphasise the importance of close relationships with caregivers in the development of an understanding of mind (Carpendale & Lewis, 2006). Hobson (2002) states that primary relationships influence babies’ ability to engage with others, which has implications for their capacity to interact with others in the relatedness triangle. The correlation between attachment and understanding of minds clearly adds weight
to the argument that emotional engagement is at the very root of children’s understanding of minds.

Through my explorations, I have come to understand that during the first few years of life, children embark on a journey of differentiation which starts from an innate ability to identify with other people, and ends at the conscious realisation that people are individuals with different desires, perspectives and beliefs. A number of biological factors propel children in the right direction, firstly by focusing their sights on the people around them, and later by facilitating their exploration of the world. However, people, and particularly familiar others, support babies every step of the way in their journey towards understanding of minds.

Emotional connectedness between babies and people is at the heart of an understanding of minds. Carpendale and Lewis (2006, p.246) stress that “cognitive processes”, like mental state understanding, do not develop in an emotional vacuum”. From birth, babies are drawn to people, and people are drawn to them. Babies are driven by their emotional engagement with others to interact and communicate. When they begin to share the world with other people, they come to learn that people have different perspectives, and indeed different desires and beliefs. This leads to the differentiation of self and other, and gradually results in an understanding of minds.

Conscious understanding of others, and consequently conscious thought, develops from an innate understanding of others. It seems that just as there was once deemed to be a “great chain of knowing” (Gopnik et al., 2001), in the theory of mind tradition there appears to be a “great chain of understanding” which considers conscious, rational understanding of minds to be superior to, or at least more worthy of attention than, intuitive, emotional understanding. However, the development of a conscious understanding of minds is dependent on an intuitive feeling of being like other people and on an innate desire to engage with people. It seems that the sensation of being like other people is crucial to the development of an understanding that you are different from others. Gopnik et al. (ibid., p.55) argue that the ability to link with other minds is the “innate foundation for our understanding of mind”. It has been suggested that children with autism do not develop an understanding of minds because they lack such a foundation (ibid.).

This is an account of my understanding, hitherto, of how children come to understand minds. As I have delved deeper into the world of children’s understanding of minds, I have discovered ideas and explanations which I have either rejected or accommodated into my understanding. My mission has been driven by my connection with the subject and my desire to understand; as with babies learning about the people around them, the attitude of wanting to learn was imperative. During my search, there was a series of realisations as ideas clicked into place, but no “ah-ha!” moments. The process of deepening my understanding has been gradual and is by no means complete; indeed, many areas are patchy or overlooked entirely.

During my search, I did not investigate how and when babies learn that people are individuals with intentions and attention. My understanding starts from the assumption that babies understand agency. In addition, although I looked to various sources to investigate the process by which children come to understand minds, I still do not fully understand how they make the transition from understanding that people have desires to understanding that they have beliefs. Wellman’s (1990) assertion that the transition from simple desire psychology to belief-desire psychology occurs when children realise that minds are representational devices does not explain how such development takes place. It could be that children suddenly learn that people’s actions are based on their perception of the world, or it could be that they learn about beliefs through talking about mental states. Indeed, the role of language has been
entirely neglected in this account. Nevertheless, even if I had considered and addressed all these aspects of understanding, my understanding would not be ‘complete’. Just as we never stop learning about how other minds work, we never stop sharpening up our understanding of the world. Understanding is merely a work-in-progress which is gradually refined through further experience.

References


Appendix A: Hobson’s (2002) Relatedness Triangle