

SOCIAL COGNITION

Social-Cognitive Development in Early Childhood

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Introduction

Social cognition has to do with thoughts and beliefs about the social world. The topic encompasses beliefs about others, the self, and people in general, as well as beliefs about specific aspects of people (e.g., thoughts, desires, emotions), and about social groups and social institutions. The development of various forms of social-cognitive understanding is one of the most important achievements of childhood cognitive development.

Subject

Social cognition has been a central topic in child psychology since the inception of the field.¹ As was true for many topics, the dominant approach through the mid 20th century was that of Piaget.² Piaget argued that young children's thinking is characterized by egocentrism, or difficulty in separating one's own perspective from that of others. Thus preschool children often assume that others think or feel or wish exactly what they do, a basic deficit in social-cognitive understanding. Subsequent research has demonstrated that Piaget somewhat underestimated young children's perspective-taking abilities.³ Nevertheless, his work did identify a central challenge in any social-cognitive activity: separating one's own viewpoint from that of others. Indeed, in some situations

even adults are prone to egocentric responses.^{4,5}

Perspective taking is just one of several headings under which social cognition has been studied. Work on metacognition, for example, examines children's understanding of mental activities – what they know, for instance, about memory, attention or language.^{6,7} Here and in general, even preschoolers show simple forms of understanding. Most developments in metacognitive understanding, however, are not evident until the grade-school years, and in many instances, development continues into adulthood.

In recent years most research on social cognition has been carried out under the heading of theory of mind.^{8,9,10}

Theory of mind is broader in scope than its predecessors, encompassing understanding of the full range of mental states, as well as the antecedents and consequences of such understanding. An additional difference is the focus on young children; theory of mind began as a preschool literature, and in recent years has been extended to toddlerhood and infancy as well. The result is both a fuller and a more positive picture of young children's abilities than had been the case with the first generation of research on social cognition.

Problems

As with many topics in child psychology, work in social cognition addresses three general issues. One is the descriptive question: What develops and when does it develop? Challenges here include devising optimal assessment methods for the developments in question and identifying interrelations among different forms of understanding.^{11,12} A second question is why these developments occur. What are the causal forces that shape children's social-cognitive understanding? A final question concerns the effects of advances in social cognition. How, in particular, do children's social interactions change as their social-cognitive abilities mature?

Research Context

Although naturalistic data play some role,¹³ most of what we know about social-cognitive development comes from a wide variety of ingenious experimental measures. One example – and by far the most often studied example – is the false belief task.¹⁴ The false belief task tests a basic component in the understanding of belief: the realization that beliefs are mental representations and not direct reflections of reality, and as such may be false. Other tasks test other forms of

epistemic understanding, for example, the ability to separate appearance from reality¹⁵ or the knowledge of how evidence leads to belief.¹⁶ Still other tasks are directed to other mental states, for example, the realization that different people may have different desires,¹⁷ or understanding of the relation between desire satisfaction and subsequent emotion.¹⁸ A research literature has also grown up devoted to developments beyond the preschool period—the capacity for recursive thinking, for example, and an enhanced appreciation of individual differences in people’s mental states.¹⁹

Recent Research Results

In a general sense, research on theory of mind is reminiscent of the earlier Piagetian literature, in that it often surprises us with respect to what children do not yet know. Thus prior to age 4 most children find it difficult to understand that beliefs can be false, either the beliefs of others or their own beliefs.¹¹ They show a myriad of other misconceptions and confusions as well, including difficulty in separating appearance and reality¹⁵ and problems in tracking the relation between experience and belief formation.¹⁶ On the other hand – and in contrast to the Piagetian literature – the difficulties are not long-lasting, for many basic developments, including understanding of false belief, emerge by age 4 or 5. Indeed, some recent research, still controversial, suggests that the rudiments of false belief understanding may be present in infancy.^{20,21} For so-called nonepistemic states, such as pretense or desire, basic forms of understanding emerge even earlier than for belief, in some instances by age 2. The result is a valuable corrective to the earlier literature on social cognition, which had characterized the preschool period primarily in negative terms. Finally, recent research has not only documented a wide range of early appearing social-cognitive achievements but also provided evidence of the effects of such developments, in that it demonstrates consistent relations between social-cognitive understanding and the quality of children’s social interactions.²²

Research Gaps

As is true in many areas of child psychology, we know more about what develops in social cognition than we know about how it develops. All theories agree that both social experience and biological maturation must play a role; theories differ, however, in the relative role accorded to these factors, in exactly how they are posited to operate, and in the form that the underlying knowledge system is assumed to take.^{10,23} Resolving these discrepancies remains a task for future research. Another challenge for future research is to expand the cultural scope of research on

theory of mind. Research to date suggests both some basic similarities in development across the world's cultures and some intriguing differences stemming from different cultural emphases.^{24,25}

Conclusions

The study of social cognition, one of the venerable topics in child psychology, has been reenergized by the work on theory of mind. This work has identified a wide range of social-cognitive achievements that emerge in the first 4 or 5 years of life. It has also provided preliminary answers to two questions that are the subject of ongoing research: What are the origins and what are the consequences of social-cognitive understanding?

Implications

Social cognition – especially as studied under the theory-of-mind heading – is primarily a normative topic, in that it concerns basic developments that virtually every child eventually masters. Exceptions occur in certain clinical syndromes, most notably autism; indeed, the theory-of-mind approach has been central to our understanding of the difficulties faced by people with autism.²⁶ In typical development, however, social cognition is not something that requires explicit adult tuition. Still, this does not mean that there is no role for parents or teachers. Various kinds of social experience can hasten the onset of social-cognitive abilities, including certain forms of parental child rearing.²⁷ Recent research also indicates that social-cognitive skills are at least somewhat trainable; approaches that emphasize the relevant mental state language may be especially beneficial.^{27,28} Beyond simply speeding up development, adults can affect the content of children's social-cognitive beliefs. All children, for example, form self-conceptions or beliefs about the self, but some children's self-conception are more positive and development-enhancing than those of others.²⁹ Social-cognitive abilities can be used not only for positive purposes (e.g., empathy, communication) but also for negative ones such as teasing or bullying.^{30,31} These, too, can be affected by parental practices. The clearest pragmatic implication of work on social cognition has long been evident: Experiences that alter children's social-cognitive beliefs in a positive direction can have a beneficial impact on their social behaviour and social acceptance.³²

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Note:

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