

Theories of Mind: Representation, Reflection and Relativity across Cultures

In recent years, experimental tasks have been applied to young American children which have shown that sensitivity to others' states of mind is not innate in humans, but develops in the course of childhood. Certain theorists insist on the role of cultural and linguistic exposure in the development of this ability, while lamenting the lack of data from a wider cross-cultural sample. Astington (2006: 187), for example, "sees children internalizing their culture's construal of mind through linguistic social interaction."

The Mopan Maya are indigenous inhabitants of Eastern Central America among whom blame for wrongdoing is assessed by the amount of damage done rather than by the perceived degree of mental guilt. The characterization of "lying", with full complement of negative evaluation, applies to any false utterance, regardless of the utterer's mental state when making it. Institutionalized fiction is unknown, and novel metaphor is strongly dispreferred.

How then do Mopan deal with Theory of Mind tasks? If Astington is right, we might expect to see relativity effects from language use that would distinguish Mopan results from those of North Americans. In fact, Mopan youngsters demonstrate full understanding of the fact that another person can have false beliefs. By this standard psychological measure, there is little difference between traditional Mopan and middle-class American Theories of Mind, despite the strong differences in mental-state-relevant interaction patterns between the two cultures.

The Mopan result can be interpreted within the framework of traditional Mopan notions of representation and reality: Although Mopan know that others can have false beliefs, they do not use this knowledge to excuse falsehood because, in Mopan, a separate and sacred morality inheres in maintaining a strictly accurate mapping between spoken word and actual world. The nature of the transgression involved in speaking falsehood is cosmological rather than interpersonal (Danziger 2001).

The analysis can be verified with reference to extended Theory of Mind tasks which were designed to tap into the distinction between a child's understanding that another can be wrong (false belief) and the understanding that different people can have different but equally valid views of reality (Carpendale and Chandler 1996). On these tasks, Mopan youngsters to the ripe age of 16 do not show any clear development toward the North American 'adult' view. This result robustly maps the cultural non-translatibility of the very notion that belief states might be perspectival relative to reality.

Taken together, the Mopan results support some degree of universality across cultures with respect to Theory of Mind. But they also show that Theories of Mind -- both Mopan and middle-class American -- are not without their cultural configuration. Linguistic experience may indeed play an important role in fostering the development of culturally particular ideas about the nature of mind.

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References cited in abstract:

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