

## Communicative depth: Soundings from developmental psychopathology

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### Abstract

My aim in this paper is to consider what it means to engage and communicate with another person. I do so by adopting the approach of developmental psychopathology, and compare and contrast the structure of communication that is manifest by typically developing infants on the one hand, and by children and adolescents with autism on the other. I highlight the pivotal significance of human beings' propensity to share or otherwise co-ordinate experiences with others, and analyze the conditions that make sharing and other forms of intersubjective relatedness possible. Often, discussions that oppose cognitive, affective, and motivational accounts of autism are pursued in an inappropriate frame of reference: at root, we need to understand the nature and developmental implications of affected children's difficulties in achieving communicative depth. In the pursuit of such understanding, we may gain insights into typically developing infants' capacities for intersubjective engagement.

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My purpose in this theoretically driven contribution is to consider the nature of human interpersonal engagement and communication, and reflect upon its origins in infancy. I adopt the approach of developmental psychopathology, and explore whether we might gain new insights into these matters through evidence from early childhood autism. I shall argue for four distinct but overlapping propositions:

1. Uniquely human forms of communication that have roots in infancy shape cognitive development and more specifically, provide the foundations for symbolic functioning. These forms of communication are epitomized by, but not reducible to, how humans share experiences both in immediate dyadic person-to-person exchanges, and within person-person-world (triadic) relations. Quintessentially, they involve interpersonal engagement, and only secondarily are they concerned with the transmission of 'information' from one person to another.
2. The specialness of interpersonal engagement stems from the human propensity to *identify with* the bodily expressed attitudes of other persons. This propensity takes on increasingly sophisticated forms with development, but at all periods of life it is characterized by the tendency to assume something of another person's attitude as one component

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of a particular species of dyadically structured mental state – again, exemplified by but not restricted to what we recognize from a phenomenological viewpoint as the state of sharing experiences with someone else.

3. This relational architecture for human social life is at once affective, cognitive, and motivational. Or to express this differently, it is only for particular purposes that it makes sense to analyze the affective, cognitive, and motivational aspects of identifying with others. Rather, we should consider how identifying with others contributes to what *become* these partly separable facets of mental life. Once the phenomena of identifying with others are appreciated, we are also better placed to explain the development of specifically human forms of ‘social emotion’. For example, we may discern the nature of and basis for such relational feelings as concern and guilt.
4. The process of identifying with others is critical for some but not other aspects of human social-emotional and cognitive development. For example, there are forms of attachment and social emotion that appear to be shaped by, but not founded upon, such relatedness.

### 1. The uniqueness of human infancy

Much has been written about the source or sources of uniquely human forms of thought and culture. Recent accounts by Tomasello, Carpenter, Call, Behne, and Moll (2005) and Hobson (2002/2004) focus upon the qualities of and motivation for person-with-person engagement that are manifest in the social relations of human infants, but relatively limited (for different reasons) both in non-human primates and in children with autism. These forms of communication are candidates for explaining how human beings come to acquire the propensities and capacities to adopt and to understand psychological perspectives towards the world and themselves. The present paper is an attempt to explicate a family of processes – those involved in identifying with other people – that may illuminate what such engagement entails.

One way in which to approach the uniqueness of human infancy is to work backwards from what emerges out of infancy. Although there are obvious hazards in supposing that every emergent property of the mind has precursors in infancy, it is also helpful to see how alternative theories of early psychological development specify plausible preconditions for what we observe to develop in subsequent phases of childhood.

An obvious place to begin on such a backward-reaching tack is with the emergence of symbolic functioning somewhere before the end of the second year of life. There are several forms of symbolizing, especially in language, but one important and relatively explicit form of symbolizing, namely making objects (or imagined objects) stand for other things or events in play, logically entails that a child who plays has self-awareness of him/herself introducing new meanings to the vehicles of play (e.g. Hobson, 1990; Leslie, 1987). This in turn requires that the child observes the distinction between a person-anchored meaning, that is, a meaning or description attributed to something by someone, and the object or event to which that meaning is applied. The meaning itself, of course, is anchored in a person’s relatedness towards the environment, and what the environment affords.

Although I shall not dwell on the details of how such an insight into people’s meaning-conferring potential might be attained, elsewhere (e.g., Hobson, 1993, 2000) I have argued that such conceptual understanding of selves-as-symbolizers requires preconceptual grounding in an infant’s propensity to relate to and (in part) to assume the bodily expressed attitudes of other people in relation to a shared world. The reason is that it is through adopting co-referential attitudes *with someone else in relation to* given objects and events in the world, that infants are in a position to register and subsequently to understand how such objects and events can mean different things to different people. A critical part of this developmental process is that the infants can, within their own experience, find themselves adopting two person-anchored attitudes to particular objects and events, one that is, as it were, direct and unmediated by social influence, and another that is acquired by assuming the stance of someone else.

Where in early development do we find manifestations of such ‘preconceptual grounding’ for the development of social understanding? As several writers have pointed out, towards the end of the first year there emerge forms of social referencing and joint attention that appear to have a uniquely human characteristic: the propensity to share experiences of objects and events with others. It is not just that infants turn to others to be informed of the meaning of objects and events in their environment, nor is it simply that they make and respond to requests, but in addition, they point out things and bring things to other people to share (e.g. Bates, 1979; Bretherton, McNew, & Beeghly-Smith, 1981). The critical point here is that whereas non-human primates appear to engage in joint attention and social referencing to find out about the world, human infants do something further: they show such patterns of behaviour with a view to establishing and sustaining an orientation towards and involvement with the person with whom the joint attention is taking place.

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