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## New Ideas in Psychology

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/newideapsych](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/newideapsych)



# Intersubjectivity and egocentrism: Insights from the relational perspectives of Piaget, Mead, and Wittgenstein

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### A B S T R A C T

*Keywords:*

Egocentrism  
Meaning  
Perspective-taking  
Mead  
Piaget  
Wittgenstein

Beginning with Piaget's concept of egocentrism, we explicate a view of differentiating and coordination perspectives on which language and cognition are based by also drawing on insights from Mead and Wittgenstein. The concept of egocentrism is linked to Piaget's view of knowledge and development. In overcoming egocentrism, infants differentiate the world from their action. We extend a Piagetian approach to overcoming egocentrism with regard to children's social knowledge by drawing on Mead's view that minds and selves emerge from the social process. Children must take the role of others for selves to emerge, a process that is rooted in interaction, requiring sufficient experience with others to be able to anticipate others' response or attitude to their act. Then the self can respond to one's own act as the other would. From Piaget's perspective, these are schemes or patterns of action that develop with repeated experience. From Wittgenstein's perspective, these patterns are embedded in forms of life; natural ways of reacting to and interacting with others that are characteristic of our species. Overcoming egocentrism or developing perspective taking is required for understanding and for human forms of cognition.

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The ability to understand and coordinate perspectives with others is a foundational skill on which language and culture are based; thus, it is an essential aspect of what it means to be human. This raises the question of how human infants come to understand that they have a perspective that differs from

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that of others. Piaget's concept of egocentrism is linked to this problem and we address this issue by drawing on three scholars—Piaget, Mead, and Wittgenstein—who, although they may differ greatly in their respective focus and motivations, have contributed to what we will call a relational conceptualization of understanding. Much can be gained from explicating and interpreting important aspects of their work in this light.

Currently, there is a great deal of interest in the question of how infants come to understand others' perspectives. Research on social development in infancy is now discussed in terms of infants' emerging ability to share attention with others, referred to as joint attention. Many approaches take what we consider an individualistic perspective based either on simulation, acquiring an insight about other people, or on the assumption that this ability is based on the maturation of innate modules. Elsewhere we have critiqued these positions (Carpendale & Lewis, 2004, 2006; Racine & Carpendale, 2007a, 2007b); here we elaborate a relational approach to infant social development.

We begin with the notion of egocentrism, a central concept in Piagetian theory that follows from Piaget's constructivist view of knowledge and development. According to Piaget, "early childhood egocentrism is the unconscious confusion of one's own point of view with that of the other" (Piaget, 1977/1995, p. 279), or "a lack of differentiation of the self from its surroundings" (p. 305). These are slightly different definitions in that the first refers to the infant's lack of awareness of having a perspective, and development involves a process of coming to understand that she and others have points of view and that they differ. The second concerns knowledge of the physical world and the infant's lack of differentiation of her own action from the world. In this article we extend a Piagetian approach to the issue of infant social development and draw on Mead and Wittgenstein in explicating the process of how forms of understanding are rooted in shared practices. If overcoming egocentrism involves the ability to differentiate and coordinate others' perspectives in a social sense, then it will be related to social understanding and language. Thus, the concept of egocentrism is central in child development.

## 1. Individualistic versus relational interpretations of egocentrism

Piaget felt that the notion of egocentrism was so misunderstood that he instead emphasized the idea of *centration* and the development of *decentration*. One reason that the concept of egocentrism tends to be misunderstood is that it is linked to and follows from the particular view of knowledge on which Piaget based his work, and it can mean something quite different if assimilated to different epistemological frameworks (Carpendale & Lewis, 2004, 2006; Jopling, 1993; Müller & Carpendale, 2004; Overton, 1994; Racine & Carpendale, 2007b). Such general frameworks can be grouped into two families: individualistic and relational. From the individualistic perspective, or what Jopling (1993) labels the philosophy of subjectivity, the starting point is the individual self and her own inner experience from which the social and physical world are derivatively understood. Thus, the problem is how the individual comes to understand and communicate with other minds. This framework seems evident in Descartes and some approaches in cognitive science. In contrast, from the relational perspective, or what Jopling refers to as the philosophy of intersubjectivity, development begins with the infant's activity, and the infant's understandings of self, other, and the world are gradually differentiated out of this activity. That is, relations to the physical and social world are not derivative but primary and self and mind are a developmental outcome. The problem here is the simpler one of coordination and integration of experience rather than the philosophically complex problem of early introspection and understanding minds via analogy. This framework is assumed by scholars such as Piaget, Mead, and Wittgenstein, as well as by some approaches in embodied cognitive science.

From the perspective of an individualistic epistemological framework, being egocentric is to be aware of your own perspective but not that of others. That is, the individual's own perspective is assumed as a given. In everyday use the word is used to refer to someone who thinks only about himself. Piaget's concept of egocentrism has often been interpreted in this way due to being assimilated to an individualistic framework, even though Piaget explicitly tried to block this interpretation. From Piaget's relational perspective, in contrast, the infant begins with no awareness of different perspectives or of the fact that she has a perspective at all—this gradually develops. So, for Piaget, egocentrism is "narcissism without a Narcissus" (Piaget, 1970/1972, p. 21). That is, infants focus on their

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