How Infants Know Minds

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Every once in a while, a piece of academic writing appears like a breath of fresh air in the somewhat musty world of scholarly discourse, armed with a renewed look at ordinary phenomena without fear or favour. This is the enduring feeling I have had of Reddy’s book that came out almost two years ago. Here was a psychologist who has had the courage and conviction to step out from established ways of searching through our reality to make sense of it. I am happy to be a member of the undeclared fraternity to which Reddy belongs.

The implications of her writing, however, became the playing field for a rather interesting public debate. Are babies innocent creatures at the outset, gradually becoming corrupted by the wicked world, or are they essentially tendentious? Overnight, Vasudevi found herself, rather unintendedly surrounded by public attention for her rather neutral assertions about things that babies do. The debate traveled from the predominantly Christian world where Reddy has made her home, to ours as well. Here is one extract.

On the 10th of July, 2007, this article appeared in the Times of India section on ‘Health and Science’ regarding the myth of infantile innocence.

Don't go by their angelic smiles and their swaddling clothes. Babies aren't as innocent as they look, according to new findings by a researcher in the UK. Sweet little infants actually learn to deceive before they can talk, says University of Portsmouth psychology department head Vasudevi Reddy in a study that challenges traditional notions of innocence while confirming many parents' suspicions about their sneaky babies, reports the Globe and Mail. Most psychologists have believed that children cannot really lie until about four years of age. But after dozens of interviews with parents, and years spent observing children, Reddy has determined that infants as young as seven months are quite skilled at pulling the wool over their parents’ eyes. Rather than being a sign that your child is the next James Frey or Richard Nixon, Reddy says, baby lies are simply part of learning social interaction.

Long before children can understand complex ideas about truth and deception, Reddy writes in Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society, "they are engaging in subtle manipulations of their own and others’ actions, which succeed in deceiving others at least temporarily." There was the 11-month-old who, caught in the act of reaching for the forbidden soil of a house plant, quickly turned his outstretched hand into a wave, his mother reported to Reddy, "as though he was saying, 'Oh, I wasn’t really going to touch the soil, mom, I was waving at you.'"

Fake crying is another trick babies learn early on to get attention, Reddy says. The researcher defines “fake” crying as being more calculated than the usual "I'm tired/hungry/ wet/hurt/lonely" cries. "In one case the mother thought it sounded 'put on', but watched from a crack in the door, and noticed that there were pauses in the crying which seemed rather like waiting to see if it worked," Reddy said…..But babies don't deceive their parents out of some malevolent impulse. On the contrary, it’s their way of striking up a conversation, Reddy theorises.

Infancy is that ever alluring research domain that has figured significantly in the disciplines of developmental psychology, psychology, child development, cultural psychology, evolutionary psychology and the specialized outgrowth, called infant studies (Keller, 2007). The interests
in the book lie in its attention to the fundamental questions of the ontogenesis of human intellect. Reddy begins with a look at the very basic ‘historical’ distinction inherited by the still youthful discipline of developmental psychology; babies know ‘bodies’, not minds. Going beyond this powerful focus has been a definite act of courage. She dwells on the essential mind-body dichotomy that persists in psychology.

While investigating social cognition, infancy has provided a stiff challenge to scholars, primarily on account of the absence of language. The etymology of the term ‘infancy’ derives from the Latin word *infans* that means ‘inability to speak’. The study of infancy in this context has methodological salience as well as significance in understanding intentionality and ‘person-relations’. Particularly on account of the absence of exchanges using language, any exploration of infancy would be disembodied without an acknowledgement of a researcher’s personal insights.

The author keeps her own personal reflections very much in the forefront while writing and speaks candidly with the reader. She even compares book writing with the birth of each of her children. The reader is encouraged to approach the text unhesitatingly, open to the dissolution of the distance between personal life and the printed word.

Why study infants’ minds?

The author effectively argues the case for studying infant mentalistic awareness, as opposed to just awareness of behavior. The mind-body dichotomy either disembodies the baby or slights its mindfulness. She draws parallels to the research of cultural practices here, e.g. the contentious dichotomy between beliefs and practices. While giving a weighted mention to parental ethnotheories, the author makes significant connections between mind and body awareness; and parental knowledge and experience as pitted against expert advice on the cultural psychology plane. These connections greatly help, in her words, ‘to mind the gap’ in current human development research, using the well-known punch-line of the London Underground that repeatedly asserts users to watch their step while boarding.

Reddy’s work has direct bearing on the methods we use in engaging with infants, whether it is for research or personal relationships. In fact that is the significance of her work, that there really should be no distinction between research and reality. Elsewhere, we have read Valsiner’s (2007) repeated assertions, that good research should attempt to minimize the distance between ‘data’ the product of research, and ‘phenomena’, the real-life events to which they putatively refer. Reddy keeps this distance consciously in check through her book. She carefully ‘minds the gap’ and traverses this stretch, undertaking an enchanting journey through infants’ minds. We find ourselves within the cozy ‘privacy of psychological phenomena’ as well as scrutinized, and studied vis-à-vis select untapped domains like the early awareness of others’ minds being one such domain. The charm in her writing is precisely providing us with a way of integrating our personal and academic worlds, an activity that is so dear to me (first author, Chaudhary, 2004, see Introduction).

The author focuses very fluently on herself as a researcher and herself as a person during the research process. She sensitively outlines how she often neglected responding as a person as she was ‘acting’ researcher, and sees these instances as missed opportunities or moments. She has developed the ‘second-person approach’ which sees ‘response’ from the other as paramount in the infant developing awareness and knowledge of the world. This approach resonates with some of the writings of methods that are more in consonance with cultural-historic process of self-other realizations within the ideologies of Indian Psychology (Rao, Paranjpe, & Dalal, 2008). Her work dissects the more traditionally studied, behavioral components under a new (and not so new) lens to see how these contribute to the understanding of the theory-theory. The same infant sometimes ‘imitates’ and sometimes doesn’t. Why might this be so? The explanation is neither neurophysiological nor temperamental, nor for that matter cognitive. She very gently introduces Vygotskian views into the theory-theory domain by rejecting the overly nativist underpinnings of infant cognitive-behavioral research and argues that the reciprocity of emotional expression and formation of other-related expectations begin as early as two months of age. She also seems to favour ethological explanations; with the numerous examples from animal behavior, delightful, sensitive and astute in observational detail. Particularly intriguing was the chickens’ example on attending and its awareness.

The book introduces an array of novel terms and redefined phenomena. For example, self-conscious emotions redefined as ‘self-other-conscious-affects’, beautifully weaves in the self-other notion along with emotions. Also in the self-other equation, the balance tilts more in favor of the ‘other’ from the very early days of infant awareness. Self-conscious emotions are rather, ‘other-conscious emotions’. It is unrealistic to isolate self-consciousness