

## DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY

### TOPIC 3: DEVELOPING AN IDENTITY

**Content:** Development of empathy and theory of mind

**KEY STUDY:** *Repacholi & Gopnik (1997). Early reasoning about desires: evidence from 14-and 18-month-olds.*

#### Background

The researchers wanted to get a better understanding of when children are able to understand that other people may have a belief or desire that is different from their own. Children who were only 14 months old offered foods that they themselves liked, but those who were 18 months old were able to separate the experimenters' wishes from their own.

#### Aim

To investigate whether or not children as young as 14 and 18 months old can use reasoning to understand desire for a particular food.

#### Participants

81 children aged 14 months old (41 male; 40 female) and 78 children aged 18 months old (37 male; 41 female) from middle-class families where both parents were together. 72% of the sample were white.

#### Procedure

The procedure consisted of two conditions:

- The matched condition: this involved the experimenter showing pleasure when he/she tasted a sweet cracker and disgust when he/she tasted raw broccoli.
- The mismatched condition: this involved the experimenter showing pleasure when he/she tasted raw broccoli and disgust when he/she tasted a sweet cracker.

The experimenter then placed one hand with the palm upwards, between the two bowls of food (i.e. the sweet cracker and the broccoli) and requested of the participant, '*Can you give me some?*' so that it was not clear as to which food the experimenter was referring – the child had to make that decision on the basis of how they had seen the experimenter react to each food.

#### Results

The 18-month-old children offered the experimenter the food that he/she had shown pleasure tasting (i.e. the sweet crackers in the matched condition and the broccoli in the mismatched condition). In a baseline test the 18-month-olds had shown a preference for the sweet crackers but this did not appear to influence their choice of food in the mismatched condition: they still offered the broccoli. The researchers state that this is evidence of the 18-month-olds using earlier emotional cues to infer which food the experimenter desired.

In contrast, the 14-month-olds offered the sweet crackers (i.e. the food they preferred), regardless of the experimenter's prior behaviour showing preference for the broccoli.

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**Conclusion**

Children as young as 18 months old may have the ability to infer another person's desires based on their prior behaviour.

**Evaluation of Repacholi & Gopnik (1997)**

**Strengths**

- ✓ This was a well-controlled experiment which used counter-balancing of conditions to avoid order effects confounding the results.
- ✓ The findings shed some light on the remarkable ability of very young children to use theory of mind in order to ascertain what another person feels about a target object.

**Limitations**

- X The 18-month-olds may simply have remembered which food the experimenter preferred and so they may have offered that food based on their superior recall to that of the 14-month-olds rather than on their inference of another person's desire for one food type over another.
- X The sample demographic may have biased the results as it is probable that middle-class parents are more likely to expose their child to a range of emotions and situations in which the child is encouraged to interpret other people's behaviour than parents who may be less affluent, with more stressors in their lives and therefore will have less time to devote to encouraging their child's finer social skills.

**Reference**

Repacholi, B. M., & Gopnik, A. (1997). Early reasoning about desires: evidence from 14-and 18-month-olds. *Developmental Psychology*, 33(1), pp. 12-21.