

be limited by current blinders in how to conceive of the relationship between language and thought.

In this commentary I have suggested two ways in which their argument can be strengthened, namely, by moving beyond an analysis of words and by picking up on the notion of indexicality. Grounding discussion of children's construction of mind in the interdisciplinary study of language, thought, and culture will ultimately provide fruitful new avenues for future analyses.

## Agency mediation and an understanding of the mind

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**Abstract:** This commentary is an attempt to give a Vygotskian perspective on Carpendale's & Lewis's (C&L's) target article. The article uses ideas that are well familiar to Vygotsky's scholars. However, it develops these ideas further and raises important empirical questions about the role of social interaction in the development of social cognition. The article provides a fresh view on the old problems and frames themes traditional for the English-speaking developmental psychology into a broader international perspective.

Paradoxically, Carpendale & Lewis's (C&L's) article is probably the first serious attempt to frame the discussion on the development of social understanding in a social context. The main point of C&L is close to the one targeted by Lev Vygotsky, who raises the question of whether children create their theories of the social world on the basis of their innate modules and independent life experiences or they create those theories within a social interaction (1999). Having reviewed a vast number of sources, the authors come to the conclusion that social understanding is "the emergent product of social interaction" (Gibbs 2001). Within a Vygotskian social-constructivist perspective, the idea seems quite mundane. However, though implanted in the context of ongoing discussions about innate "modules," "implicit knowledge," and inherent understanding of "affordances" – concepts that have long dominated developmental psychology in English-speaking nations – the ideas proposed in the target article are actually fresher than they might seem at first glance.

Having discussed the ample empirical evidence demonstrating that a higher level of social understanding is more evident in children who have closer positive relationships with significant others than in those who have less close relationships, C&L use this evidence to outline directions for future research that could bring this relatively stale area of studies out of the deadlock of the "theories of mind." One of these directions might be studying multiple nonverbal interactions that occur in the natural social setting and play a major role in promoting social understanding, especially at the early, prelanguage stages of development. The central claim of C&L is that the focus of research should be shifted from investigating mental states and mentalist concepts as the outcomes of children's understanding of others' minds to the careful analysis of social interactions and cultural contexts that shape the content of children's social knowledge. In fact, the authors resurrect the old but fundamental question of how social interaction should be understood. Is social interaction "based on the interaction of minds which can be properly understood only when one takes into account what people think about other people's thoughts" (Permer & Wimmer 1985, p. 438), or is the mind itself "the product of social life and . . . activity which was earlier shared by two people" (Luria 1969, p. 143)? I am sympathetic with the authors' adoption of Chapman's (and Luria's) view on this point: that social interaction is at the base of mental and social understanding.

But do social interactions directly shape children's growing un-

derstanding of mental states? Or is there a mechanism that mediates the link between social interactions and children's social understanding? Closely following Wittgenstein's view of the "socially projected" nature of mental activity, the authors at the same time strongly emphasize that a child is an active agent within social interaction, and not a passive recipient of socially induced knowledge. In this, C&L closely approach the "activity principle" in the understanding of cognitive development that has long been employed by the Vygotskian tradition (see El'konin 1969). The "activity principle" suggests that the simple fact of a child's involvement in social interaction is a necessary but not a sufficient condition of the child's improvement of his or her social understanding (as well as his or her understanding of other people's mental states). It is important to analyze what position (active or passive) the child, as an agent, takes in this social interaction.

One striking example of the role of agency in social interaction can be found in studies on children's moral understanding. In one of these studies, preschool children who had previously transgressed on moral tasks (such as deliberate cheating) were asked to instruct other transgressors to observe the same moral rules (Subbotsky 1993). Although in the post-tests all the "instructors" revealed an equal degree of understanding of what was right or wrong to do in social interactions with a "moral underpinning," only those children who had actively accepted the position of a moral instructor did not repeatedly transgress if given a chance to do so. This example empirically illustrates a circularity puzzle (a circle) that is inherent in the claim that children are agents within a social interaction: that is, whereas interactions can facilitate children's understanding of other people's (and their own) mental states, it is the child him- or herself who ascribes value to the acquired knowledge. On this ground, the claim promoted by C&L, that children's social understanding is shaped while they interact with others, should be supplemented by the principle of "agency mediation." This means that social interaction can elicit a proper (and not only formal or verbal) social understanding in a child only when the child takes an active position within the interaction and implants the acquired social knowledge with personal (and emotional) meaning. In fact, this provides an answer to the question formulated by Astington and Olson (1995): Does a child passively adopt mentalist concepts available from cultural social surroundings, or does the child actively construct these concepts within the interactions?

The principle of "agency mediation" also gives us a chance to integrate a vast body of fascinating studies of the social context of problem-solving interactions and "theory of mind" into the studies on social intelligence and personality (Cantor & Kihlstrom 1989; Dunbar 1996; Garton 2004; Gauvain 2001). The context of an individual's social life shapes his or her understanding of mentalist states (such as beliefs, desires, intentions, attitudes) only when this context is filtered through the individual's integrated "self" (personal identity). The "self" (agent) exercises control over the person's immediate actions and also sets up the individual's ultimate life goals. In light of the "agency mediation" principle, we can now reformulate the final "developmental goal" of social cognition and social understanding: to achieve an understanding of other people's minds for the purpose of using this knowledge for building stable and happy personal (moral, social, business, and other) relationships.

To conclude, C&L's paper utilizes ideas that have been around for a considerable period of time. Nevertheless, the paper does raise interesting and intellectually challenging theoretical and empirical questions about the role of social interaction for the development of social cognition. It stimulates a refreshing way of thinking and gives a good stir to the problem that has been boiling for a long time within the encapsulated circle of English-speaking developmental psychology.