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The Role of Theories in Children's Social Cognitive Development

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Systematicity is evidenced in all areas of human cognition. In their defense of the Classical model (GOFAI), Fodor and Pylyshyn (1988) show how the productivity and the systematicity of human cognition is exhibited through the use of language. The assumption is that the well-observed productivity and systematicity of language requires an underlying cognitive structure with a correspondingly similar architecture. In a similar vein, many theorists in the area of categorization and concept formation also believe that concepts in a given domain are not singular units, but mutually inter-dependent elements in a hierarchical structure (Carey, 1985). After Carey's work, many researchers in developmental psychology argue that children's cognitive development depends upon theories around which children construct their conceptual knowledge. Since theories are applicable only to a given domain, researchers partition children's knowledge into different cognitive areas: e.g., categorization (Murphy and Medin, 1985), physics (Leslie, 1994), and biology (Hatano and Inagaki, 1994).

In the area of social cognition, the Theory of Mind hypothesis (Wellman, 1990) endorses the view that children need to have a theory about how mind work in order to successfully interact with others. Two serious problems have been raised against the Theory of Mind paradigm. Firstly, younger children do not seem to be sophisticated enough to know any *theory* at all. Secondly, even if younger children's understanding of other people can be viewed as a theory, the Theory of Mind hypothesis generally fails to give a satisfactory account of how children acquire such a theory of mind. Despite some Theory of Mind advocates' proposal for an innateness modular thesis (Baron-Cohen, 1995) to remedy the problems, many researchers reacted by simply rejecting the whole idea of folk-psychology as a theory (Hobson, 1991). However, as Nelson (1996) argued, many concepts are cultural abstractions whose meanings can be defined only in the structures of taxonomies and hierarchies. Becoming a competent member of a speech community means that the child must incorporate the conceptual categories and organizations of the society during the process of language acquisition.

In contrast to many theorists, I argue that folk-psychology is not a sort of knowledge base in an individual's head, but a social construct that is shared, shaped and modified by all members of the society. First of all, the meanings of words are determined not by private referential acts, but by communal practices of a speech community as a whole. Bruner (1983) showed that younger children's natural expressions are understood and completed as 'proto-speech acts' by adult care-givers. Care-givers, as representatives of the society, would help them to conventionalize their natural expressions through game-like interactional routines like 'peekaboo'. The

phenomenon of psychological symbiosis in language acquisition persists through adulthood because the meanings of many terms in a language, including natural kind terms, are determined according to the principle of 'the division of linguistic labor' (Putnam, 1975). Furthermore, cross-cultural and cross-linguistic studies show that social cognitive concepts like 'mind' and 'person' are highly culture- and language-dependent theoretical constructions (Shweder and Miller, 1985). In light of these, I contend that mind is not an entity inside each individual's mind, but a shared cultural construction that is maintained by the society as a whole.

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