

Stability and Continuity in the Development of Theory of Mind in Middle Childhood. Trajectories and Predictors of Development

One of the main social competences important in the modern world is the ability to understand the behaviours of other people with whom we act together in complex social situations. Both efficient cooperation and competition are possible when we correctly interpret the desires, intentions or beliefs of other people. This competence is known in sciences as theory of mind. Developmental psychologists have proved that even 1-year-old children demonstrate a remarkable ability to pay attention to the goals of the actions of others, and this ability becomes a foundation of formation of further important competences. For example, young children playing with a toy together with an adult who then leaves, know when they then receive another to play with that when the adult returns his/her surprise refers to the toy he/she is not familiar with. In another experiment, it has been shown that even before children reach the age of 2 they know that an adult might have different desires and preferences from them (e.g. likes broccoli more than crackers). However, not until the age of 4 do children solve tasks requiring conclusions on someone's knowledge and beliefs (so-called false belief tests). Such complicated thinking about what another person thinks and knows develops intensively at the end of pre-school age (middle childhood).

The first objective of the research planned in our project is to describe the developmental changes in theory of mind in children aged 5, 6 and 7. This will make it possible not only to determine how theory of mind develops in general, in all children – whether it is continual development, or whether some sudden, irregular changes take place – but also to present individual paths, i.e. the so-called trajectories of theory of mind development in this period. The children participating in our project have already been tested on six occasions, between the ages of 1 and 3 and a half, and therefore in the continuation of our research we will be able to identify whether, for example, a child who at 1 year old was considerably ahead of his/her peers in early theory of mind retains this fast path of development at 5 or 7, or whether there were periods of a lack of increase in competences.

Our second aim is to answer the question of what are the conditions or important factors in theory of mind development in children. By testing children's other competences – e.g. their language skills, intelligence, memory or ability to reason – we will check to what extent these factors affect the change in theory of mind. We believe that the most important element that conditions development of theory of mind is a child's interaction and way of communicating with both adults and peers. In our project, we therefore construct tests in which the child has the opportunity to read someone's thoughts and beliefs while playing or solving a task together with the other person. By watching what the child points at, pays attention to, and asks about, we can learn how he/she cognises the social world, and in particular the world of the minds of other people.

From the point of view of the science of developmental psychology, our project seeks to answer very fundamental questions of the nature of early, and then advanced theory of mind, and what influences its development. In other words, we ask when and under which influence such manifestations of advanced theory of mind as understanding non-literal messages, metaphors or homonyms and synonyms appear in children. It would appear that participation in a discussion, learning the points of view of another person, what that person is really thinking when, for example, he/she asks us a question are situations in which theory of mind develops. At the same time, its development means that we can function increasingly competently in a further conversation or, for instance, in a situation when a teacher asks a child a question about something he/she already knows. Success in school is probably also success in coping in a complex social situation, in which a child has to consider – often at the same time – points of view presented to him/her: what the teacher asked about, what a friend answered and what the child knows about the subject. Studying theory of mind in children at the end of pre-school age can therefore provide pointers on how to support the development of social competences in children.