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Introduction

Imitation and Socio-Emotional Processes: Implications for Communicative Development and Interventions

M. Suzanne Zeedyk and Mikael Heimann

INTRODUCTION

Imitation is a phenomenon that seems to have engaged developmental psychologists throughout their century-long history. In 1906, Baldwin argued, in his seminal text, that the development of self and other was so interconnected that humans are essentially 'imitative creations' (Baldwin, 1906). By the 1960s, Piaget's theory about the development of memory and representation, and imitation's role within that, had begun to fundamentally re-shape the field's conception of infant development (e.g. Piaget, 1962). In the 1970s, the discovery that neonates could imitate adults' facial expressions when only minutes old sparked heated debate about humans' innate social endowment (e.g. Maratos, 1973; Meltzoff & Moore, 1977). The beginning of the 21st century finds the field turning to questions about robotic and computer-generated imitation (e.g. Bailenson & Yee, 2005; Nadel, Revel, Andry, & Gaussier, 2004). What can a special issue on imitation add to this extensive history?

The aim of this volume is to extend current conceptions of imitation by bringing together two domains that are generally confined to separate literatures: those relating to infancy and to communicative interventions. All the contributors are interested in the role that imitation plays in socio-emotional processes, and they seek to better understand how knowledge about infants and interventions can be mutually informative. Such connections are expected to yield insights that will be helpful to the field at both theoretical and applied levels.

The origins of this special issue lie in a series of three specialist seminars, held during 2003 (Dundee, Scotland) and 2004 (Bergen, Norway and Leeds, England), which brought together researchers and practitioners whose work focuses on socio-emotional aspects of imitation. Participants were 13 in number, drawn from the UK, Norway, and Sweden, all of whom feature as authors in this issue (Astell, Braarud, Caldwell, Ellis, Hart, Heimann, Laberg, Nagy, Nordøen, O'Neill, Stormark, Strid, Zeedyk). We hope that this group would be able to find common ground, even within the diversity in their approaches (experimental designs, naturalistic observations, case studies, practitioners) and in their domains of expertise (infancy, autism, global delay, deafblindness, dementia). We were more

1 than successful, for we found that the outcomes of our discussions were
2 compelling enough to cause us to reflect anew on the very bases of human
3 intersubjectivity.

4 The first three papers in this issue focus on imitation during infancy.
5 Nagy reviews the evidence on neonatal imitation, arguing that communi-
6 cation originates from imitative exchanges with adults, and that the later devel-
7 opment of language depends on this initial platform. Her analysis gives
8 particular attention to the neural structures that are needed to support imitation
9 and the possible developmental changes in those structures. Braarud and
10 Stormark present findings on the contingency of mother–infant interactions,
11 thereby providing an important theoretical context into which to place imitation,
12 given that imitation is essentially a specialized form of contingency.
13 Finally, Heimann, Strid, and colleagues emphasize the link that exists between
14 socio-emotional and cognitive aspects of imitation, by showing that deferred
15 imitation, as a test of memory, is a key predictor of the later emergence of
16 language. This first set of papers thus captures key themes of the infant imitation
17 literature.

18 The next five papers draw on such infant theory to explore the potential that
19 imitation holds as an intervention for enhancing the communicative abilities for
20 individuals coping with some form of impairment. Caldwell discusses her work
21 as a practitioner with adults who have severe autism, and Hart takes a similar
22 perspective in discussing his work with deafblind adults. Younger age groups are
23 considered by Heimann, Laberg and Nordøen, who compare the outcomes of
24 two types of intervention in preschool children with autism, and also by O'Neill
25 and Zeedyk, who document the spontaneous use of imitation in a group of
26 young people with global developmental delay. Astell and Ellis move to the other
27 end of the lifespan and explore the potential of imitative interventions for elderly
28 people suffering with severe dementia.

29 Finally, Zeedyk seeks to link the two domains of infancy and interventions in a
30 theoretical paper that explores the role of imitation in facilitating the transition
31 between intersubjectivity and subjectivity. She argues that emotional intimacy is
32 central to this process, and that the process is essentially the same for typical and
33 atypical developmental trajectories.

34 We believe the papers in this issue offer some stimulating findings. In the
35 process of arriving at these intellectual outcomes, we enjoyed ourselves im-
36 mensely and were treated to unique experiences of one another's countries. In
37 only three short meetings, we were able to build the kinds of relationships and
38 memories that fuel ongoing, dynamic research networks. We are grateful for the
39 funding that made this collaboration possible, provided by the British Psycho-
40 logical Society (through their Research Seminars Competition) and the University
41 of Bergen (through the Centre for Child and Adolescent Mental Health), along
42 with contributions from the City of Dundee and the Norwegian Consulate Gen-
43 eral. We wish to thank those who acted as referees for the papers, as well as the
44 editors of *Infant and Child Development* for their interest in publishing this set of
45 papers. Finally, it is appropriate that we acknowledge the impetus provided by
46 the Developmental Section of the British Psychological Society. It was at their
47 Annual Conferences that the idea for this seminar series was first conceived in
48 2002, and at which we presented the culmination of our efforts in a pre-confer-
49 ence workshop in 2004. The experience has left us eager to craft opportunities for
50 future meetings, and we hope that the publication of our findings here may
51 inspire others to create their own multidisciplinary networks. Working at the

1 margins of a field is an excellent means of fostering innovation in thinking and
3 practice.

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