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AUTHOR Bearison, David J.
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ABSTRACT

This study examines the development of communication and social inference in terms of the child's immediate social environment, the child's role systems, and the standards of interpersonal relationships. Middle-class mothers and fathers of first, third, and fifth graders were asked what they say to their children in several common situations in which there is an obvious need for a parent to regulate a child's behavior. They were asked such questions as, what would you say if your child (1) refused to go to school and you knew there was nothing wrong, (2) took something off the shelf of a supermarket without paying for it, (3) picked flowers from a neighbor's garden, or (4) refused to go to bed long after bed time in order to watch something on T.V. Results show that on each of the communication measures, children of predominantly person-oriented parents were more effective communicators than children of predominantly position-oriented parents. The differences in communicative effectiveness, as measured, reflected differences in the children's ability to coordinate listener-speaker perspectives. (SW)

Verbal Communication in Children from Person and Position Oriented Families

David J. Bearison

City University of New York

Our interest in children's communication stems from a broader interest in children's ability to make inferences regarding other people. The kinds of inferential behavior that interests us is the child's capacity to take another person's perspective.

The study of perspective taking, like the study of any behavioral process, requires an experimental context in which it can be easily measured. A particularly appropriate context in which to study social inference in children is how they verbally communicate to others. This is so because in order to be an effective communicator one must continually accomodate his communication to the informational needs of his listener as they are determined by the listener's particular perspective of the referent. In other words, an effective communicator is one who is able to take the perspective of his listener and is able to coordinate it with his own perspective. Communication, understood in this sense, is not a function of linguistic competence but of role-taking or person perception.

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Piaget (1926) as well as other investigators (Flavell, 1968; Krauss & Glucksberg, 1969; Rubin, 1972) have shown that children, prior to the age of seven or eight, are notoriously poor communicators because of the egocentric quality of their thinking. They are basically incognizant of the notion of a perspective. They communicate to others as if everyone shared their own intuitively derived point of view. In effect. They are social prisoners of their own biased world view.

Most studies of children's communication have approached the issue from a predominantly cognitive orientation. They have attempted to delineate antecedent cognitive skills that are necessary for effective communication, they have related the ability to communicate effectively to other cognitive functions, and they have examined the situational generality of effective communication. We are studying the development of communication, and hence social inference, in terms of the child's immediate social environment, its role systems and standards of interpersonal relationships. A child's parents are his primary socializing agents and together their behavior constitutes for the developing child his psychological reality of how people respond and react to one another.

According to Basil Bernstein (1972) a family's social structure can be universally formulated in terms of its person or position orientation. In a person orientation, family members relate to one another on the basis of each of their own

individuating psychological properties; their needs, intents, wants and motives. In a position orientation, family members relate to one another in terms of the role proscriptions that apply to individuals given their status within the family or within broader social institutions. Status attributes such as a person's age, sex, religion, etc. form the bases of interpersonal relations. The principle distinction between a person and a position orientation is not just the type of person attributes that are recognized (psychological or status) but that in a person orientation the psychological properties of individuals are continually being made verbally explicit in the manner in which the parents communicate to their children.

It is important to add that person and position orientations are not simple dichotomies; families are not one or the other. One family is distinguishable from another according to the degree to which one orientation is realized over the other.

The realization of one orientation over the other is seen in the types of verbal appeals that parents use in regulating their children's behavior. A parent expresses a person orientation in the child's presence when he indicates to the child that his behaivor is, or should be, contingent on the needs, wants and/or motives of others. A position orientation is expressed when the parent indicates to his child that his behavior should conform to socially ascribed rules of behaivior. What

gets expressed in position oriented statements are status attributes of individuals and the rules that go with one's status. The psychological properties of individuals are not made verbally explicit.

We have been asking middle-class mothers and fathers (separately) of first, third, and fifth graders what they say to their children in several common, everyday types of situations in which there is an obvious need for a parent to regulate his child's behavior. These regulatory situations were initially proposed by Bernstein. The parents were asked what they would _ay_ to their child if (1) he refused to go to school and the parent knew there was nothing wrong with him, (2) he took something off the shelf of a supermarket without paying for it, (3) he picked flowers from a neighbor's garden, and (4) he refused to go to bed way after his bed time because he wanted to watch something on T.V.

Responses that explicitly expressed the feelings, thoughts, needs, and/or intentions of individuals (be they the parents' child's or those of another person involved in the situation) were scored as person oriented. Responses that expressed a social rule, independent of the psychological qualities of individuals were scored as position oriented. Further distinctions were made according to _whose_ feelings, thoughts, needs, or intentions were made explicit in person oriented responses and what kinds of social rules were made explicit in position-oriented responses.

There was a wide range of types of social appeals offered by every parent. No parent made only person oriented statements while just a few were 100 per cent position oriented. Position-oriented statements tended to be much shorter than person oriented statements and the former left little room for further discussion to ensue between parent and child.

In the time that's left I'd like to report some findings concerning the relationship between the social orientations middle-class parents express to their first grade children and the children's levels of communicative effectiveness. Communication was measured according to a procedure proposed by Flavell (1968) and modified somewhat to suit our own particular purpose. The children were invited to play a simple board game with the experimenter. Without actually being told how the game is played, the children learned the game by watching what the experimenter did. After playing several rounds of the game, they were asked to tell another person how the game is played; they were not allowed to actually play the game. The children communicated to two different listeners--one was sighted, the other wore a blindfold. By using sighted and blindfolded listeners, we were able to set up two comparative communicative situations, one in which the speaker and listener shared a critical perspective and one in which the speaker-listener perspectives were markedly different. Having one listener wear a blindfold created a

difference of perspectives between the child and the listener that was very obvious to a young child and which was relatively easy for him to understand.

We were interested in knowing to what extent the children would be able to accomodate their communication to the particular informational needs of the blindfolded listener relative to their communication to the sighted listener. There were four measures of communicative effectiveness: (1) the amount of useful game information they communicated, (2) the number of verbal referents they communicated that were incomprehensible to their listener, (3) the number of words communicated, and (4) the communicative channel in which information was communicated--verbal-deictic gestures or verbal description.

The results were that on each of the communication measures children of predominantly person-oriented parents were more effective communicators than children of predominantly position-oriented parents. The differences in communicative effectiveness, as measured, reflected differences in the children's ability to coordinate listener-speaker perspectives. They did not reflect differences in levels of verbal-linguistic skills. There were no differences between groups in communicating to the sighted listener and there were no group differences in vocabulary test scores.

We have concluded (Bearison & Cassel, in press) that these findings are evidence of a relationship between the structural properties of a social system and the social-cognitive behavior of children developing and functioning within that system. In a person-orientation there is a greater realization of individualized roles and role systems as opposed to communalized roles. Communalized roles remain relatively invariant across social situations while individualized roles vary a great deal from one situation to the next. In this sense, a person orientation carries with it a more differentiated role system than a position orientation.

Before closing, I should add that we conducted several tests to check on the validity of our method of assigning parental orientations. We had initially suspected that asking a parent to report to a psychologist what they would actually say to their children in a given situation might only reflect the parent's degree of social sophistication as regards the "appropriate" way to raise children. In other words, parents who offered person-oriented responses might have been those who thought that that is the type of response that a psychologist would expect. As a check for this, we asked a pilot group of parents to anonymously select one of six statements that came closest to what they would actually say to their child in each of our four regulatory situations. Three of the statements were position oriented and three

were person oriented. We found no difference in the distribution of responses made by parents in the multiple choice type questionnaire and in the open ended interview. Parents selected position oriented statements even when they had in front of them person oriented statements to choose from. As a further check, parents were routinely asked at the end of the interview what they suspected was the purpose of the interview. While most parents thought it had something to do with how good they were as parents, no parent came close to defining "goodness" in terms of a position-person orientation.

We are presently comparing types of regulatory appeal responses between mothers and fathers and how they interact with the age and sex of their children. Preliminary analyses have shown that fathers are more person oriented with male children and mothers are more person oriented with female children. This difference is most pronounced by the time the children are 12 and 13 years and might reflect a basic mechanism for children's sex role identification. With this in mind, we have just begun to examine differences in content between mother's and father's responses.

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