

GAMES AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF PERSPECTIVE TAKING

Alex Gillespie

Department of Psychology

University of Stirling

Stirling, FK9 4LA

Scotland

UK

alex.gillespie@stir.ac.uk

Tel: + 44 (0) 1786 466841

Fax: + 44 (0) 1786 467641

Key words: Mead, position exchange, perspective taking, intersubjectivity

It is widely acknowledged that perspective taking is fundamental to the development of the self, the development of the individual's ability to interact meaningfully with other people and to the successful functioning of society. Attempts to articulate the mechanisms underlying perspective taking have relied upon internal cognitive mechanisms; the child can imitate (or internally simulate) the perspective of others by virtue of identifying with the other or internalising the perspective of the other. However, as Martin (200?) argues, any explanation relying solely upon cognitive mechanisms is unsatisfying and potentially circular: it assumes, as an internal ability, that which the theory is meant to explain. A satisfactory explanation must have recourse to social interaction; either to the interaction context in which the innate ability was selected for or to the social interactions that extend these innate, but very rudimentary abilities, into elaborate forms of perspective taking. To this end, Martin (200?) makes two contributions, firstly, he uses Mead to identify one type of social interaction that may be particularly important for the development of perspective taking, and secondly, he proposes a program of research that will differentiate this theory from alternative theories. I will expand upon each of these contributions in turn, firstly drawing out 'position exchange' as a novel dimension of social interaction, and secondly, illustrating why Martin's suggested research should study the children's game of hide-and-seek.

PERSPECTIVES AND SOCIAL POSITIONS

Fundamental to the Meadian theory that Martin is developing is a distinction between perspectives and social positions. Perspectives, as described by Martin (200?), refer to the relation between an actor and the environment. This relation is carved, primarily, by action. Action is the meeting point between the embodied desires of the

actor and the constraints of the environment. The environment, from the perspective of the actor, contains paths of action leading to the satisfaction of various desires. The problem of perspective taking, then, is the problem of how children become aware of the action orientations of others

Social positions, which are given less attention by Martin, are functional positions within institutionalised patterns of interaction, or, what Mead (1925; Gillespie, 2005) calls 'social acts.' Examples of social positions within everyday social acts include: speaking/listening, buying/selling, winning/losing, giving/receiving, requesting/helping, attacking/defending, leading/following, questioning/answering, lending/borrowing, and commanding/obeying. Social positions also exist in play: children enjoy enacting the social positions of buying and selling, of feeding (usually a doll) and being fed, of giving and receiving, of chasing and escaping, of teaching and learning and so on.

In order to use this distinction between perspectives and social positions to understand perspective taking, two assumptions must be made. Firstly, each social position, given its social and structural configuration of affordances and constraints, sustains a perspective. The social position patterns the occupant's experience. Being, for example, in the social position of receiving can sustain experiences of joy, indebtedness and even resentment. The complementary social position of giving, on the other hand, can sustain experiences of loss, vicarious joy, and superiority, amongst others. Secondly, people frequently exchange social positions within social acts. Sometimes people give and sometimes they receive; sometimes people command and at other times they obey; sometimes people buy and sometimes they sell, and so on. Children, when playing, change social positions with particular frequency.

So, given these two assumptions, how does perspective taking develop? Taking the perspective of the other needs to be theorised alongside ‘taking the social position of the other.’ When the child, during position exchange, takes the social position of the other, the child cultivates the perspective of the other because each social position sustains a distinct perspective. Ontogenetically, then, the form of perspective taking is not perspective taking as such, but is simply taking up and enacting the social position of the other. Through taking the social position of many others, in play and actuality, the child cultivates the diverse perspectives that are sustained by social and institutional structures. The child becomes, in an embodied sense, a buyer and a seller, a care-giver and a cared-for, a teacher and a learner, a doctor and a patient and so on. Thus the Cartesian gulf is bridged; all children within the same society and moving between the same social positions will cultivate the same matrix of perspectives. However, it remains to be explained how a child integrates the correct complementary perspectives so that when in one social position the child is aware of the perspective of the other (without being in the social position of the other). The key mechanism is again position exchange within a social act. Consider the social act of giving/receiving. In the course of development children move between the social positions of giving and receiving innumerable times. Indeed, sometimes young children and their caregivers play at simply giving and receiving things. Repeatedly and rapidly moving from the social position (and thus the perspective) of the recipient to the social position (and the associated perspective) of the giver could, potentially, differentiate and integrate the perspectives of the giver and receiver. Having thus integrating these two *differentiated* perspectives, the child is able to take the perspective of the receiver while being in the social position of the giver and *vice versa* (Gillespie, 2005).

In the foregoing review I have tried to emphasise 'position exchange' because it is both fundamental to Mead's theory, and because it can make a significant contribution to the literature by highlighting a new social dimension. Traditionally 'the social' has been theorised in terms of social interaction without position exchange. In Piaget's (1932) work on the development of morality the focus is on symmetrical and asymmetrical interactions but in both cases the social position of the child is fixed. Vygotsky (1987, chapter 6) posited that adults and more advanced peers create a zone of proximal development around the child's activities which 'scaffolds' development. That is to say that the adults do something to the child, but the child never changes social position with the adults. More recent work on 'guided participation' (Rogoff, 2003, chapter 8) emphasises the role of cultural tools, such as language, to bridge divergent perspectives and thus enabling adults and more advanced peers to structure the experiences of the child. However, again, the child's position within the interaction remains fixed; the child's attempts to guide the participation of a doll, or of an even less adept child, are outside the theoretical frame. According to Mead it is position exchange with in social acts that 'scaffolds' perspective taking not the actions or utterances of the other *per se*.

Hobson (2002), who comes very close to a Meadian approach, also misses the potential link between position exchange and perspective taking. Both Hobson and Mead conceive of development as being a gradual process that is irreducibly both social and biological. Both accept the existence of innate rudimentary structures of intersubjectivity, and both accept the outcome of development to be the child's ability to entertain two perspectives at once (Hobson, 2002, p.109; Gillespie, 2005). Moreover, both posit triadic relations between self, other and object as the motor of this

development. The difference between Hobson and Mead hinges upon the dynamics which occur within this triangle.

“Awareness may dawn gradually. The infant has repeated experiences of the triangle. Each time, the process of identification exerts its pull *towards* the position of the other. And, each time, the child's experience of the world shifts as a result of the pull.” (Hobson, 2002, p.108)

Notice that within these triadic dynamics, as described by Hobson, the position of the child is fixed. The child comes to appreciate the perspective of the other through the cognitive process of identification; while the child's body stays in the same corner of the triad, the child's mind learns to wander. In Mead's account, however, first the child's body moves, by position exchange, cultivating, differentiating and integrating complementary perspectives, and only after this integration, is the child able to take the perspective of the other without taking the social position of the other. The difference between Mead and Hobson, then, is the difference between a covert and cognitive process of identification on the one hand and the overt and social process of position exchange on the other.

To summarise, then, social theories of development have tended to focus upon what happens between the child and the other: Is the interaction symmetrical or asymmetrical? Does the other facilitate the child's participation? Does the other structure the child's experiences? Does the other mediate the child's relation to the object? Does the child identify with the other? Across these questions the social position of the child remains constant and the distinction between the child's perspective and the social position that the child happens to occupy is not theorised. However, observational studies of children at play reveals that position exchange is widespread. The significance of Mead's theory, is that it makes visible a new social dimension, enabling

us to ask a new question: Does the child ever occupy the social position of the other? From a Meadian perspective repetitive position exchange within social acts is the motor that facilitates both the differentiation of perspectives and the integration of perspectives, such that the child can come to participate in two different perspectives at the same time.

POSITION EXCHANGE WITHIN CHILDREN'S GAMES

Martin's (200?) second contribution, in keeping with his pragmatist theoretical framework, is to tease out the empirical consequences of Mead's theory, and differentiate it from the alternatives, by proposing a program of naturalistic and experimental research. The context for the proposed research is the social act of feeding. The social positions within this act are those of feeding and being fed. In the naturalistic research, these caregiver-child interactions would be video-taped, and analysed for instances of perspective taking and position exchange, and the relation between these two processes would be traced as it develops. The experimental intervention would have three conditions: a control group, a scaffolding group (interaction with a more experienced peer), and a position exchange group. In the case of feeding, the control group would have normal feeding interaction, with the social positions relatively fixed, the scaffolding group would have an adult facilitating their activity, and the children in the position exchange group would sometimes be in the position of feeding and sometimes be in the position of being fed. By comparing perspective taking within these three groups the research could tease apart the differential contributions of position-exchange and scaffolding in perspective taking.

In terms of design, this brief outline is powerful. However, I suggest that the social act of feeding is not an ideal context for the research. Firstly, it is not necessary

for the child to take the perspective of the mother in order to be fed successfully. This may make it hard to find instances of perspective taking to analyse. Secondly, introducing scaffolding will be difficult because it is unclear exactly what activity will be facilitated by the adult. Thirdly, position exchange does not commonly occur in naturalistic feeding interactions, which consequently will create problems for the naturalistic observation of position exchange because there may be too few instances. Finally, because position exchange rarely occurs in feeding interactions, the experimental introduction of position exchange will be somewhat artificial.

Such artificiality can be avoided, however, because children spontaneously engage in numerous acts of position exchange. Indeed, there are many social acts incorporating position exchange that are peculiar to children. Children commonly play dolls, mums and dads, school, hospitals, shopping and a variety of games (Opie & Opie, 1969). One game that seems particularly suited to exploring Mead's theory is the popular game of hide-and-seek, which prototypically involves someone hiding and someone seeking. The history of this game goes back at least to the Ancient Greeks (Opie & Opie, 1969) and the game appears to have been independently invented in various cultures (Pandya, 1992). In all cases, two social positions and thus two perspectives can be clearly identified. As it is commonly played in the UK, the seeker closes her eyes giving the hider time to hide, then the seeker shouts out that she is beginning to search for the hider. Each social position entails a different action orientation (i.e., a different perspective). The seeker does not know where the hider is and has the interest of finding the hider. The hider usually knows where the seeker is, and has the interest of remaining concealed. Because the seeker does not have any interest in concealing herself from the hider, the seeker often addresses and even taunts the hider, but the hider, having the interest of remaining hidden, must not reply to these

taunts or else she will give away her location. Not only does the game of hide-and-seek contain and structure different perspectives, but more interestingly, it also entails repeated position exchange as the players repeatedly move between the social positions of hider and seeker.

Peskin and Adrino (2003, p.506) report the errors that three and four year olds make when teaching a confederate how to play hide-and-seek. Theoretically, two types of error can be distinguished. Firstly, children fail to differentiate the perspectives of hider and seeker. For example, they might assign both themselves and the confederate to the same social position (i.e., they would seek together despite the fact that nobody was hidden); they might tell the confederate where to hide; and/or, they tell the confederate where they themselves were going to hide. Secondly, sometimes the children do not manage to regulate their actions within one social position from the perspective of the complementary social position. For example: they begin to hide before the confederate has looked away; they simply fail to conceal themselves properly; and/or they do not manage to remain concealed.

The game of hide-and-seek thus clearly contains the key elements of Mead's theory. To be a successful participant, the child must firstly *differentiate* the two social positions with their respective perspectives and secondly *integrate* these perspectives so that she can regulate activity within one social position with respect to the complementary perspective. Moreover, a central feature of the game is that the child repeatedly moves between the social positions of hider and seeker. Thus one can ask: Is the child, while searching for a place to hide, learning to search for a place that she would not think of seeking? And is the child, while seeking, searching for places that she herself would think of hiding? The game of hide-and-seek, clearly operationalised the main aspects of Mead's theory, thus avoiding the need for artificial manipulations.

Hide-and-seek is also ideally suited to longitudinal research focusing upon processes (Valsiner & Connolly, 2003) because it is a social institution that has many levels of complexity and can thus support the development of perspective taking throughout child development. At the most basic level of complexity are games like peek-a-boo, where the child and carer take turns in concealing and revealing their faces to each other (Bruner & Sherwood, 1975). From peek-a-boo the child can move onto the most basic forms of hide-and-seek which in turn leads on to numerous complexities like playing in the dark, hiding objects instead of bodies, and allowing the hiders to move around. More complex games which entail similar social positions include, kiss chase, cops-and-robbers, and treasure hunting. Raising the level of complexity still further, it is possible that narrative structures, which often involve hiding/seeking or escaping/chasing social positions, may further enrich the evolving architecture of intersubjectivity; further differentiating and integrating the perspectives. Dramatic films, for example, often have narratives that swivel upon the dynamics of escaping and chasing. In order to be able to follow such narratives the viewer must alternate between taking the perspective of the hider and the seeker. At this level of complexity, the child no longer takes the actual social position of either hiding or seeking, but merely has her own experiences of hiding and seeking re-organised, elaborated, differentiated and integrated by the narrative. Thus in hide-and-seek we find a social institution that facilitates development over the course of many years, and which increases in complexity as the child develops. Longitudinal research questions could thus focus on the incremental differentiation and integration of perspectives within this social act starting from a very basic level up to quite high levels of complexity. One could compare children who engage in frequent position exchange with those who do not. Or, one could introduce experimental interventions, as suggested by Martin. In any case, the

social act of hide-and-seek offers more clear opportunities for operationalising Mead's theory within a longitudinal design.

People have different perspectives because they occupy different positions in space and time (Farr & Rommetveit, 1995). This difference, however, is augmented by social institutions that channel us in divergent directions, situating us in diverse social positions, each with its own matrix of constraints and affordances. Yet relatively stable social institutions may also be the bridge enabling us to traverse the Cartesian gulf of divergent perspectives. Relatively stable social institutions, supporting relatively stable social positions, and people exchanging positions within these institutions, provides a means of sharing and coordinating these diverse perspectives. Hide-and-seek, I suggest, illustrates this clearly. The game creates a divergence of perspective between the hider and the seeker, yet the game also, by virtue of fostering position exchange, provides the means to integrate these divergent perspectives such that children can learn to take the perspective of the other without being in the social position of the other.

REFERENCES

- Bruner, J.S. & Sherwood, V. (1975). Peekaboo and the learning of rule structures. In J.S. Bruner, A. Jolly & K. Sylva (Eds.), *Play: Its role in development and evolution* (pp. 277-285). Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Farr, R. and R. Rommetveit (1995). The communicative act: An epilogue to mutualities in dialogue. In I. Markova, C. F. Graumann and K. Foppa (Eds.) *Mutualities in Dialogue* (pp. 264-274). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gillespie, A. (2005). G.H. Mead: Theorist of the social act. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 35, 19-39.

- Hobson, P. (2002). *The cradle of thought: Exploring the origins of thinking*. London: Macmillan.
- Martin, J. (200?). Re-interpreting Internalization and Agency Through G. H. Mead's Perspectival Realism. *Human Development*, X, xxxx
- Mead, G. H. (1925). The genesis of self and social control. *International Journal of Ethics*, 35, 251-277.
- Opie, I. & P. Opie (1969). *Children's games in street and playgrounds*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pandya, V. (1992). Gukwelonone: The game of hiding fathers and seeking sons among the Ongee of Little Andaman. In B. Hewlett (Ed.), *Foundations of human behaviour* (pp. 263-279). Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Peskin, J. & V. Ardino (2003). Representing the mental world in children's social behavior: Playing hide-and-seek and keeping a secret. *Social Development* 12, 496-512.
- Piaget, J. (1932). *The Moral Judgment of the Child*. NY: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich.
- Valsiner, J. and K. J. Connolly (2003). The nature of development: The continuing dialogue of processes and outcomes. In J. Valsiner and K. J. Connolly (Eds.), *Handbook of developmental psychology*. London: Sage.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1987). Thinking and speech. In R. W. Reiber and A. S. Carton (Eds.), *The collected works of L. S. Vygotsky. Vol. 1: Problems of General Psychology* (pp. 37-285). New York: Plenum.