

EARLY DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL MONITORING

Philippe Rochat & Tricia Striano

Emory University, Atlanta, GA 30322

The development of social understanding begins long before the well documented "9 month revolution" when infants start to display signs of secondary intersubjectivity indexed by joint attention, social referencing, imitative learning, gestural and symbolic communication. Prior to an understanding of others as rational agents that are guided by concrete goals, purposes, desires, and eventually beliefs, young infants develop an ability to resonate to fluctuations in the affective states of others, to adjust to their affective fluctuations, and to read their emotions. A sense of shared experience or intersubjectivity emerges from this development. The early development of intersubjectivity is viewed as a necessary prerequisite for later social cognitive development. In support of this contention, results of 3 recent studies are presented demonstrating that between 2 and 6 months, infants demonstrate a marked development in their sensitivity to 1) social contingencies and the invariant structure of ritualized games, 2) emotional expression during a still face episode, and 3) the particular interactive style of the social partner.

The first study demonstrate that between 2 and 4 months, infants develop a striking ability to differentiate between organized and scrambled peek-a-boo games with an adult partner. They start to look more and smile significantly less at the adult in the scrambled compared to the organized game. The second study shows that by 6 months, and not before, infants modulate their reaction to a still face episode depending on the facial expression adopted by the experimenter during this episode (neutral, happy, or sad expression). Finally, the third study indicates that by 6 months, infants' reactions to still face episodes and organized vs. disorganized peek-a-boo games depend on the previous interactive experience with the experimenter.

The results of these experiments indicate that between 2 and 6 months infants develop sophisticated abilities to monitor others in terms of how they relate to them and what can be expected from them in face-to-face interaction. These results are interpreted as indexing the rapid development of a primary intersubjectivity announcing the well documented social-cognitive changes occurring by 9 months.