

Department of Psychology

Distinguished Lecturer Series



DR. HENRY M. WELLMAN, University of Michigan

TALK: Learning a theory of mind

ABSTRACT

I will argue that “theory of mind” is a developmental achievement. It is minimally scaffolded by several infant proclivities but beyond that must be learned. How so? By children constructing new and later understandings off a platform of their earlier ones. This is a basic, constructivist proposal, all the way back to Piaget, but it is a contentious theoretical one—denied by nativists and empiricists alike. Moreover, empirically, direct evidence for this proposal is in surprisingly short supply, if the focus is sustained, everyday development of major conceptual systems. Studies on theory of mind, framed by contemporary demonstrations from hierarchical Bayesian computational learning, provide the needed evidence and theory. I will overview our research on learning a theory of mind in childhood to show that these data clearly manifest three empirical signatures of such a process of constructivist conceptual development: (1) Learning proceeds in orderly conceptual progressions. (2) Sequences and timetables are experience-dependent. And, (3) prior conceptual knowledge influences the presence and amount of learning. More intriguingly, perhaps, I will cover studies that provide cross-cultural data, data from typically developing children but also those with developmental delay, experimental micro-genetic research, and more.

BIOGRAPHY

Henry Wellman was born in Hickory, North Carolina. He received his undergraduate degree from Pomona College (1970), was a kindergarten and preschool teacher for a few years and received his Ph.D. from the Institute of Child Development at the University of Minnesota (1975) where his advisor was John Flavell. Wellman has been at the University of Michigan for more than 30 years where he is currently the Harold W. Stevenson Collegiate Professor of Psychology. For many years his research has focused on children’s developing knowledge of persons. He has written more than 100 articles and several books including “The Child’s Theory of Mind” (1990) and (with Karen Bartsch) “Children Talk about the Mind” (1995). His most recent book, “Making Minds” (2014), won both the Cognitive Development Society Book Award and APA’s Eleanor Maccoby Book Award. He is past-president of the Cognitive Development Society, recipient of an NIH MERIT Award and awards from the Cattell and the Rockefeller Foundations, and the G. Stanley Hall Award from the American Psychological Association. He is a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and recipient of the University of Michigan’s Distinguished Faculty Achievement Award. He lives in Ann Arbor Michigan with his wife Karen Lind, and has two sons Ned and Daniel.

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