

From dualism to dialogism: Laughing toddlers and puzzled theorists

Vasudevi Reddy, *How Infants Know Minds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008. 288 pp. ISBN 9780674026667 (hbk).

Reviewed by: Tania Zittoun, *University of Neuchâtel*

She was putting those tiny little pots into a long sort of box . . . when she put them in, the bottom opened and they fell out. . . . And the top and the bottom was open . . . she picked up [the box] and looked through it at us and cackled with laughter . . . she thought it was incredibly funny (Mother of Fiona, 8 months, interview). (p. 194)

In this sequence, Fiona's mother reports a situation in which her 8-month-old daughter seems to have appreciated the comic aspect of a situation and shared it with her parents. To account for such an observation, Reddy proposes that the main principle of children's development is their experience of mutual engagement with others. As it has implications for psychology in general, Reddy formulates her propositions at a theoretical level.

The book opens with a reminder of two enduring dualisms: self–other and mind–body. First, Reddy states, many currents of psychology assume that a researcher, or any person, knows what is in her mind, but considers that knowing other people's minds is a problem. Second, psychology has replaced Descartes' mind–body dualism by a mind–behaviour dualism, both methodologically (psychologists are trained to observe behaviour without interpreting its meaning) and theoretically: current psychological theories based on theory of mind imply that, early in their lives, children base their reading of others' actions only on the other's behaviour, until they accede to theories of mind at around age 4—and from there, they make hypotheses about the other's mind, ignoring their action. How we move from a world apprehended through perceptions of behaviours to a world constructed through representations remains an issue.

According to Reddy, it is impossible to account for development in infants and children without a solution to the self/other and the mind/behaviour gaps. She identifies two existing theoretical positions in psychology. On the one hand, *first-person psychology* is based on the model of a lonely thinker making hypotheses in her mind about what exists out there. On the other hand, *third-person psychology* considers that one can know self and others only on the basis of observables. Reddy proposes an alternative, a *second-person psychology*, according to which “others are experienced

as *others*, in direct emotional engagement” (p. 26). Within the limits of this active, emotionally engaged perception, others’ minds are “transparent” to the person. Hence, watching someone smile is a third-person experience; watching one’s friend smile at us and feeling the warmth that comes with it is based in a second-person experience—an experience of being “tuned” to the other. This perceptive-and-emotional reaction enables the other to feel recognized, or acknowledged, as a person expressing something (here, smiling at us). Such basic and emotional engagement provides the infant with information guiding her further actions and experiences; it is thus, for Reddy, the main process through which minds develop.

Reddy’s answer to the two classical philosophical issues is a model based on two features. First, interpersonal relationships have primacy over monological perspectives: that is, it is a *dialogical model*. Second, the *emotional apprehension* of human experience has primacy over the perceptual and representational. In so doing, Reddy contributes to the field of infant development and to dialogical approaches in social and cultural psychology.

The theoretical proposition of examining human development from a second-person perspective requires a suitable methodology. Reddy proposes a methodological posture based, first, on a balance between engagement (being engaged in the relation to other) and disengagement (stepping out of the relational flow, allowing reflection), and, second, on a “feeling for the organism,” a clinical sense for situation and what matters in interactions with infants. Given the assumption that significant second-person relationships occur only with a specific person and are in large part emotional, the children’s carers mainly produce Reddy’s data.

Concretely, the book is based on a series of vignettes generated by Vasudevi Reddy’s own observations of her interactions with her two children, at times videotaped, and mainly reported in diaries afterwards, and by mothers reporting significant daily events to a dictaphone or interviewed by Reddy and her team. Consequently, the second-person psychology proposed here is not strictly a second-person *methodology*. Reddy reports, for example, that her 2 ½-month-old daughter reacted by curving her arms close to her face in response to her grandmother’s smile and gaze, and interprets it as a form of coyness (p. 131). What interests her is the child–grandmother second-person relation, not her own relation to the child (although she interprets the fact of coyness on the basis of many comparable situations, some involving her). The technique enables the adult to describe the child’s actions, her own and her perception of the child’s expression and/or her own emotional reaction, and even her interpretation of the meaning of the situation. However, such a technique does not give access to the child’s perspective and is therefore always an asymmetric and uncritical technique. This should not be a problem from Reddy’s perspective, however, as she seems to consider that the child is exposed to the same personally and culturally constrained reactions as the parent. The strength of Reddy’s methodology is her use of many vignettes from a single case to elaborate a model that accounts for a wide diversity of situations, and even for observations produced by other researchers.

The book is constructed along a developmental perspective, following children’s development from birth (in chap. 4) to about 1 or 2 years (in chap. 10). It explores a large range of interpersonal phenomena, starting with simple ones, such as imitation (chap. 4),

early communication (chap. 5), and shared attention (chap. 6), and moves to more complex ones, requiring awareness of oneself: for example, coyness, shyness (chap. 7), and awareness of the other's intentions (chap. 8), as can be manifested in humour (chap. 9) and faking, lying, or misleading the other (chap. 10). Through each of these themes, Reddy brings her own observations and reads them in the terms of her theoretical propositions, which, in turn, get progressively deeper and broader.

Reddy challenges some of the assumptions of current developmental accounts. Her observations bring her to thus question the view stemming from current theory of mind, according to which children should not be able to lie until they can think that the other can have a representation in mind that is different from what is the case (p. 216). For example, when 11-month-old Anna keeps looking her mother in the eyes while throwing from under her arm, behind her, as if unseen, the toast she does not want to eat (p. 225), this seems to display sufficient awareness of the adult's intentions and expectations to be able to defy them. A first-person psychology cannot account for this, because the child is "too young" to have a complex representation of the other's representation. From the perspective of Reddy's second-person psychology, these observations simply reflect the child's active engagement with the adult, her awareness of the adult's intention of wanting her to eat the toast, and her response to it.

A book always has an intended audience, and its shape is partly defined by the objections it tries to anticipate. *How Infants Know Minds* responds to the focus on child development as an evolving ability to construct complex representations of other minds with a seemingly simple story: children have *direct* access to the other's intentions through their perceptions and emotions. The rhetorical orientation of the book, however, does not allow Vasudevi Reddy to make fully explicit two further important theoretical ideas that are present in her explanations: the importance of dialogical processes and general developmental principles. I want to emphasize these two ideas, so as to explore how Reddy's proposition might also contribute to advances in other fields of psychology.

First, although the "second-person" theory proposed by Reddy is contrasted to first-person (introspection) and third-person ("objective" observation) approaches, the author only mentions triadic models. She has good reasons for refusing a ternary relationships model when it assumes gaps between self and other, or mind and action. Moreover, her binary interpretation offers a parsimonious account of early development (see table 6.1, p. 115), where the second-person dynamic becomes increasingly complex to include the child's intentions about, and uses of, others, objects, and complex modes of externalization. Although this account of early development is quite convincing, in my view, her propositions can easily nourish and find a new general frame in current dialogical or cultural approaches to psychology.

Ternary models have a long history in psychology (Zittoun, Gillespie, Cornish, & Psaltis, 2007). Many are dynamic, and include the essential interdependent relationships. Hence, the psychosocial triangle represents the fundamental mutual dependency of self–other–objects relationships, as they constitute the social field, and mutually constrain and enable each other (Marková, 2008; Moscovici, 1984/2003). Similarly, the semiotic person–sign–person triangle, as in Vygotsky (1934), expresses the necessarily culturally mediated nature of intrapersonal dynamics. Such dynamic triadic models prevent any of the classical "gaps" Reddy identifies. They also account for

more generally defined dialogical dynamics (Linell, 2009; Marková, 2008), such as the manner in which human action and communication necessarily entail answers to others or anticipation of others, within webs of interpersonal or imaginary relationships. Finally, some theoretical accounts based on such models even attempt to show how interpersonal or social triangles become intrapsychological triangles (Zittoun et al., 2007). Reddy's epistemology is compatible with current dialogical accounts, and Reddy's "second-person" psychology could be seen as a model for explaining the *emergence* of the child's ability to engage in ternary relationships.

Reddy's implicit developmental model is that of progressive complexity of actions and interactions. Children adjust to their perception of the other's action, according to their actual growing capacities, and to the adult's perception of the capacities of the child. This entails an open, dynamic system, composed primarily of the child-and-the-other. The adult's actions towards the child become the enabling conditions for the child's actions, and so we have "feed-forward loops" (Valsiner, 2008). Through moments of exploration and try-and-fail (which correspond to Vygotsky's ZPD), patterns of action are progressively defined and more *differentiated*: the infant tries out alternative routes and specific actions. They also become more complex: the child is first engaged in immediate contact with the adult, and then is interested in what mediates that engagement (parts of the body, objects); he develops intentions that encompass a series of actions; she starts to use semiotic means, including language, to designate people, actions, and events. Thus, the model implies a progressive *hierarchization* of actions. Dynamic openness, progressive differentiation, and hierarchization are general developmental principles (Werner & Kaplan, 1963) and *How Infants Know Minds* gives us careful accounts of microgenetic moments of emergence of new action within interaction. Moreover, because the principles underlying these observations are more general, these early developmental observations can be located within a life-span perspective. Consequently, we should find similar core patterns of mutual engagement in interactions with older children and adults; although these should be more complex, differentiated, and generalized.

One of the challenges faced by psychology today is to develop a more integrative understanding of psychological phenomena, so as to counter the fragmenting tendency of the field (Valsiner, 2007; Yurevich, 2007). Reddy's work, which offers a rich dialogical account of early activity, offers a genetic grounding to current reflections on development in a complex social and cultural world. As I have only suggested here, *How Infants Know Minds* can be reconnected to the whole stream of literature that accepts dialogical assumptions and could offer a substantial contribution to that field: the emergence of "thirdness" within dynamic interactions can be examined and the primordial role of emotional engagement in human actions and understanding can be tracked.

References

- Linell, P. (2009). *Rethinking language, mind and world dialogically: Interactional and contextual theories of sense making*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age.
- Marková, I. (2008). The epistemological significance of the theory of social representations. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 38, 461–487.

- Moscovici, S. (2003). *Psychologie sociale* [Social psychology]. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France. (Original work published 1984)
- Valsiner, J. (2007). Becoming integrative in science: Re-building contemporary psychology through interdisciplinary and international collaboration. *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science, 41*, 1–5. doi: 10.1007/s12124-007-9002-2
- Valsiner, J. (2008). Open intransitivity cycles in development and education: Pathways to synthesis. *European Journal of Psychology of Education, 23*, 131–147.
- Vygotsky, L. (1934). *Pensée et langage* [Thought and language] (3rd ed.). Paris, France: La Dispute.
- Werner, H., & Kaplan, B. (1963). *Symbol formation: An organismic-developmental approach to language and the expression of thought*. New York, NY: Wiley.
- Yurevich, A. (2007). Has 60 years of research in psychology really gone astray? *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science, 41*, 21–27. doi: 10.1007/s12124-007-9001-3
- Zittoun, T., Gillespie, A., Cornish, F., & Psaltis, C. (2007). The metaphor of the triangle in theories of human development. *Human Development, 50*, 208–229.