



The conceptual underpinnings of pretense: Pretending is not ‘behaving-as-if’ ☆

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Abstract

The ability to engage in and recognize pretend play begins around 18 months. A major challenge for theories of pretense is explaining how children are able to engage in pretense, and how they are able to recognize pretense in others. According to one major account, the metarepresentational theory, young children possess both production and recognition abilities because they possess the mental state concept, *PRETEND*. According to a more recent rival account, the Behavioral theory, young children are behaviorists about pretense, and only produce and recognize pretense as a sort of behavior – namely, behaving ‘as-if’. We review both the metarepresentational and Behavioral accounts and argue that the Behavioral theory fails to characterize very young children’s abilities to produce and to recognize pretense. Among other problems, the Behavioral theory implies that children should frequently mis-recognize regular behavior as pretense, while certain regular forms of pretend play should neither be produced nor recognized. Like other mental states, pretense eludes purely behavioral description. The metarepresentational theory does not suffer these problems and provides a better account of children’s pretense.

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1. Introduction

In recent years psychologists and philosophers have debated the basis of children's early ability to engage in and recognize pretense. This debate emerged in response to an influential account of children's pretense offered by Leslie (1983, 1987, 1994a, 2002), which he termed the metarepresentational theory. The metarepresentational theory claims that children's twin abilities to engage in solitary pretense and to recognize pretense in other people both depend upon the same innately given mental state concept, *PRETEND*.¹ Early possession of the concept *PRETEND* would link pretense to the emergence of 'theory of mind'. Indeed, Baron-Cohen, Leslie, and Frith (1985) used this model of pretense to predict the 'theory of mind' impairment in childhood autism. A recent neuroimaging study supports the link between pretense and theory of mind by showing that brain regions typically associated with 'theory of mind' reasoning are activated when adults watch pretend scenarios (German, Niehaus, Roarty, Giesbrecht, & Miller, 2004).

More recently a number of rival accounts have been developed. Many of these accounts share the claim that children recognize pretense in a more limited way, as a kind of behavior, namely, 'as-if behavior' (e.g., Lillard, 1993a, 2001; Lillard & Flavell, 1992; Nichols & Stich, 2000, 2003; Perner, 1991). These accounts hold that the young child is a behaviorist about pretense, and so we refer to these views collectively as the Behavioral theory of pretense. Although different theorists have varying motivations for developing a Behavioral account, they share a sense that it is somehow more attractive for the theorist and simpler for the child to be a behaviorist about pretense than to be a mentalist.

In this paper, we show that the Behavioral theory is unable to account for children's pretense. In Section 1, we review some basic facts about children's pretense. We then briefly review some of the problems with traditional approaches to pretense which led to the development of the metarepresentational theory, and then briefly review the metarepresentational and the Behavioral theories. Section 2 describes some general problems with the Behavioral theory. In Section 3, we consider examples of pretense for which the Behavioral theory either has no account or gives the wrong account. We also show that attempts to modify the Behavioral theory so that it does a better job with these forms of pretense only exacerbate the problems discussed in Section 2. In Section 4, we consider a variant of Behavioral theory that allows the child to recognize a person's intention to behave-as-if and argue that it suffers many of the same difficulties as stronger Behavioral positions.

We argue that metarepresentational theory suffers none of these difficulties, and provides a better and simpler account of the development of human pretense. We conclude that, from the onset of pretending, children are mentalists about pretense in just the sense that the metarepresentational account originally suggested. In particular, older infants and very young children represent *pretending* as such. Pretending

¹ We use small capitals to indicate concepts that the child possesses and thoughts the child has. We do not assume any of these are conscious, though they may be.

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