

# SOCIAL AFFORDANCES

Organized by Diane Berry and John Fentress

## **Beyond Social Affordances: The Flow of Information in Social Kinesthesia**

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In *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* J. J. Gibson made abundantly clear his belief that the most important affordances for human beings are social and that social affordances, though "enormously complex", are nonetheless "just as much based on stimulus information as is the simpler perception of the support that is offered by the ground under one's feet". But the ground under one's feet is usually static, and even where dynamic structures have been studied, as in pointlight displays, they are viewed by a relatively static observer. Thus the traditional paradigm of stimulus and observer remains alive if not well, but is it appropriate to the study of social affordances? The problem is that the information supporting social activity is dynamic in a double sense, since both partners in an interactive episode are usually active. Furthermore, specification by stimulus information is conditional upon a number of factors of a kind not present or ignored in the analysis of 'simpler perceptions'.

First, there are cultural factors. The meaning of a smile or a wink depends on the culture and the sub-culture of the participants. Second, there are social factors. Within a given culture, the meaning of a gesture will depend upon the social status of the actors and the relationship between them. Third, there are episodic factors. Meaning is set up by the preceding sequence of interactions. We argue that the concept of affordance cannot by itself cope with these complications. Instead, cultural, social, and episodic factors are embodied in the doubly dynamic flow of information as part of a social kinesthesia rather than as social affordances. In developing this mutualist theory we draw upon our data on mealtime interactions between infants and their caretakers.

## **Early Steps Toward Language: How Social Affordances Educate Attention**

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The transition to linguistic representation in infancy apparently depends on caregivers guiding infants to notice the relation between what is said and what is done. Recently investigators have demonstrated a relation between promoting shared attention and the emergence of the lexicon. Extending this approach, my research conducted in Central Mexico and the U.S. systematically separated the means of directing attention and the topic of attention. Findings from these studies have shown that caregiver input directing attention to the relation between words and world is significantly associated with children's subsequent lexical development during the one-word period.

Little is known about the more fundamental caregiver practices that encourage getting and keeping attention. These attentional abilities may be essential to the infant's eventual successful participation in attention-directing interactions during the prelinguistic and early one-word periods. In addition, few studies of the prelinguistic period have focused on the relation between attention-directing and the emergence of the lexicon. To understand the characteristics and relative importance of perceptual, social, and cognitive processes that contribute to the emergence of the lexicon, this research examined a range of attentional interactions including getting, keeping and directing attention during the prelinguistic period and early one-word period.

Naturalistic videotapes were collected monthly from 6 middle-class caregiver-child pairs at 6 through 12 months. Attention-getting, -keeping, and -directing interactions were analyzed in terms of informational properties of the device or gesture, topic complexity, communicative level of the child, her/his focus of attention, and the infants' performance. The data were subjected to multivariate frequency analyses using log-linear methods. The analyses revealed significant associations between the variables and accounted for a large proportion of the variability.

Social and perceptual bases of the emergence of the early lexicon are proposed to explain how caregivers unwittingly cultivate everyday activities to precipitate language development. Caregivers 'educate attention' by making prominent the information in everyday events that specifies social and environmental affordances. Caregivers unceasingly direct, attune, and refine infants' perceptual abilities/attention with gestures during social interaction. In particular, during the prelinguistic period the function of attentional interactions shifted from a means to initiate and sustain interaction to a means to communicate. At first the caregiver got attention to herself, gradually sustained, modulated, and increased the duration of mutual attention during arousal sequences by varying the modality and complexity of the input, and eventually incorporated topics outside the dyad. In time less interactional work was required to get or keep the child interacting and monitoring the flow of events. By the end of the first year of life much more of the caregiver's interactional time was spent directing the child's attention to increasingly complex relations between world and words, rather than getting and keeping attention.

## **Differentiating and Evaluating Same vs. Other Race Individuals**

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Research on cross-race face recognition and outgroup homogeneity has supported the maxims 'they all look alike' and 'they all are alike'. However, much of this research has employed methods which foster category-based responding—i.e., responding to outgroup members in terms of their social category rather than their directly perceptible stimulus characteristics. Other research suggests that stimulus-based responding may militate against outgroup homogeneity—e.g., facial recognition is enhanced when perceivers have made social judgments about individual faces, something they do not spontaneously do for faces of another race. The present research investigated the extent to which whites, blacks, and orientals make physical and psychological differentiations among members of their own race versus another race when rating individuals depicted in slides. Perceivers differentiated among individuals of other races more than in research that has engaged category-based processing, and the degree of differentiation varied with familiarity with the target group. There was also strong interracial agreement in the perceived traits of the targets. This agreement was largely accounted for by interracial agreement in ratings of the targets' physical appearance (attractiveness and babyfacedness) and the cross-racial generality of two well-documented appearance effects: the attractiveness halo effect, whereby more physically attractive individuals are perceived more positively on evaluative dimensions; and the babyfacedness overgeneralization effect, whereby individuals with more neotenous facial structures are perceived to have more childlike traits. It is concluded that other-race judgments need not be category driven, and that forming impressions of individuals of another race on the basis of stimulus information provided in the face is sufficient to produce highly differentiated judgments which, rather than being racially stereotyped, correspond to impressions of the same individuals formed by perceivers of their own race.

## **Perception of Emotional Expressions as a Function of Distance**

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The emotional states of others constitute an important example of a social affordance available to perception. Human facial expressions are probably the richest source of information about emotional states. Much has been written about emotional expressions; however, previous researchers have not examined the perception of emotional expressions as a function of physical distance between the emotion perceiver and the emoting individual. Interpersonal distance is likely to be a very fruitful and important variable to investigate in this context for several reasons. It provides a novel paradigm for studying features of faces that support various emotion perceptions (eyes, mouth, etc.), and it sheds new light on our understanding of nonverbal communication and interpersonal processes (which regularly go on at varying physical distances). Furthermore, it provides psychological insight into a variety of activities, such as counseling, photography, theatre and cinema, business and organizational psychology, and eyewitness testimony. I will describe three studies done with photographed faces that examined changes in the perception of emotional arousal and hedonic tone, two basic dimensions of emotionality, as a function of decreasing physical distance. Several interesting trends were revealed in these data. For example, perceived emotional intensity increased with decreasing distance, but in a few cases, the quality of the emotion changed. In a second study, subjects spoke about the facial features they thought led to their ratings. Hypotheses generated from these protocols were tested in a third study in which parts of the faces were masked before being rated.

## **The Implications of Treating Personality Dispositions as Social Affordances**

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Treating personality traits as social affordances advances our understanding of impression formation at a number of levels. First, it will be proposed that affordances provide an amount of information that allows us to specify the relationship between social stimuli and actual properties of people; for example, people who afford mugability have a different gait than assertive persons. Second, affordances make us aware of the importance of anchoring personality in relationships and social interactions. This will be explored in terms of the implications of social synchrony information for judging dispositions such as dominance, shyness, and cooperativeness. Finally, the utility of using King Solomon type tests for making perceivable 'hidden' disposition-affordance-event linkages will be examined with respect to the meaning of accuracy in personality judgment. For example, I will examine the detection of affordances as the basis for consensus judgments.