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# AN INQUIRY INTO YOUNG CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT OF SELF THROUGH EMOTIONAL COMMUNICATION WITH THEIR FAMILY MEMBERS

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## INTRODUCTION

Infants acquire an increasingly sophisticated sense of self awareness within social contexts. As many researchers have pointed out, there is a qualitative alteration in 2-year-olds' consciousness of themselves and others as "selves". Two-year-olds manifest self awareness by using personal pronouns and they can recall something about prior experiences when asked. Hobson (1993) stressed that the terrible two's understanding of others vis-à-vis his- or herself encompasses the fact that people are sources of opposition and competition as well as co-operation.

Trevarthen (1993) made several important statements on communicative regulation of self-other relation. He said that human emotions are elaborated by learning, especially socio-cultural intersubjective learning. Dunn (1983, 1988, 1993) studied children within their families to show how children come to understand the social rules of the family and the feelings, intentions and relationships of others.

The focus of this study is on how emotional experiences through family relationships contribute to the development of Japanese 2-year-old children's sense of self and to their understanding of others.

Each family has its own emotional climate and harmonious or conflicting interactions. The dining table is an appropriate setting to reflect the natural interactions between the 2-year-old and his/her family members. These daily family exchanges at a dining table were investigated first. And second, their understanding of self and others' mind was examined by employing a kind of narrative approaches.

## METHOD

### *Subjects*

The subjects were 10 families who are part of a longitudinal study of playful teasing from early infancy (Nakano, 1997). At 18 and 24 months of infants' age, they participated in this research of children's emotional communication and their self awareness. Six (4 girls and 2 boys) were first-born and had no siblings. Four (2 girls and

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2 boys) were second, third or fourth-born and had one, two or three siblings. The mothers' average age was 31.5, and the fathers' was 33.2. All were nuclear families living in a big city of northern Japan.

### *Procedure*

#### *Family Interaction at Dining Table*

At 18 months of age, the mothers were asked to video-tape their family exchanges at the dining table when all family members were present. As they were already skilled at manipulating 8mm video cameras, they set the cameras at appropriate angles in order to facilitate the video recording.

The video tapes of the 18 month olds at the dining table were edited to focus primarily on the children's emotional expressions. The edited tapes were 5.6 minutes long on the average. Each tape included conflicting, harmonious, and normal exchanges among the family members.

#### *Semi-Structured Experiment of Children's Self Awareness*

A kind of perturbation was employed in order to analyze a 2-year-old's self awareness. The reactions to non-contingent (earlier-recorded) images on video tapes were investigated. At 24 months the mothers were instructed to watch the edited tapes of the 18-month olds at the dining table with their children and other family members, and videotape the children's reactions focusing on their facial expressions.

### *Coding*

Family conversations and emotional expressions in the tapes of the 18-month olds were transcribed in time sequence. While reconciling 24-month children's reactions with the images of 18-month videotapes, 24-month tapes were transcribed. After transcription, two-year-olds' verbal expressions to the images of themselves or to those of others were classified into three types. When children uttered their own names or "I" in response to their own images spontaneously, or when asked about these images, the behavior was classified as Type1 (Self). Pointing to the images of themselves was also included in this Type1 (Self). When children uttered "papa", "mama" or a sibling's name in response to the images of others spontaneously, or when asked, such behavior was classified as Type2 (Other). Pointing to the images of others was also included in this Type2 (Other). No verbal reference to the images on the tapes was coded as Type3 (No Reference). In each type there were positive and mixed emotional expressions. No clear negative emotions were observed. Smiling, laughing and cheerful tones of voice were classified as positive emotional expressions. Neither positive nor clearly negative expressions such as a wry smile, a serious face, a suspicious look, or finger sucking were defined as mixed emotion.

## **RESULTS**

### *Self Awareness and Understanding Others*

Nine out of ten children showed Type1 (Self) reaction. Three expressed self awareness in language spontaneously. One child from a large family employed the

pronoun “I”. When the 2-year-old children referred themselves, they showed more shyness or embarrassment than referring to others.

Eight children showed Type2 (Other) reaction. Six used the words such as “papa” or “mama” while smiling. They recognized their parents or siblings delightfully or with interest. They often turned to look at their family pointing to the harmonious images of the video as if they wanted to share joy with them.

Concerning Type3 (No Reference), all of the children expressed mixed emotion. They exhibited serious, tense looks, leaning forward postures, or restless finger sucking frequently, and yet they did not avert their gaze at all while watching the video. The video images of themselves, especially the scenes with conflicting episodes, held their curiosity and kept them in suspense.

#### *Family Exchanges and Self Consciousness*

Figure1-(b) indicates Type1 (Self). While intently watching the scene of the video (Figure1-a), she suddenly comprehends herself (A). In the video she dropped her cup with a rattling sound, and she looked her mother in the face. After calling her own name with a self conscious smile (B and C), her face became serious (D). Even though her parents were amused at the scene, she was never moved to laughter.

Figure2-(a) depicts a conflicting episode in which the child was upset with himself and his clumsiness in manipulating chopsticks. Figure2-(b) indicates Type1 (Self). He leaned forward (A), smiled a wry smile (B), mimicked his own crying face (C), and gave a suspicious look (D). He was amused at his awkwardness when his mother referred to this.

Figure3-(b) indicates Type3 (No Reference). Figure3-(a) depicts a conflicting scene where the child failed to give the food on her spoon to her father. Her father responded negatively to her failure. She watched intently while restlessly finger sucking. Her behavior showed embarrassment or shame.

Figures4-(b) and 5-(b) indicate Type2 (Other). Their joyful reactions to the images of their families showed remembered private conceptual others.

## DISCUSSION

Why do the 2-year-olds frequently express mixed emotions when they watch the images of themselves, and yet show more positive emotions in response to the images of their family members? Neisser(1993) mentioned that even the most talkative young children live chiefly in the present, with little to say about the past or the future. They do not think of themselves as having life narratives. But the result of this study suggests that even 2-year-old do express how they think of themselves nonverbally. The emotional expressions seen in Figures1-(b), 2-(b), 3-(b), 4-(b) and 5-(b) are very interesting, because they represent the 2-year-olds’ self evaluation of how they contributed to the ongoing interactions within the family context. They eagerly tried to read or understand the meaning of their behavior in the emotional communication with their family members.

Reddy *et al.* (1997) investigated infants’ sensitivity to the feelings and communicative attentiveness of their parents. They pointed out that the infants are displaying



Figure 1-(a) A conflicting scene from a dining table. The girl (18 months old) dropped her cup with a rattling sound, and she looked her mother in the face.

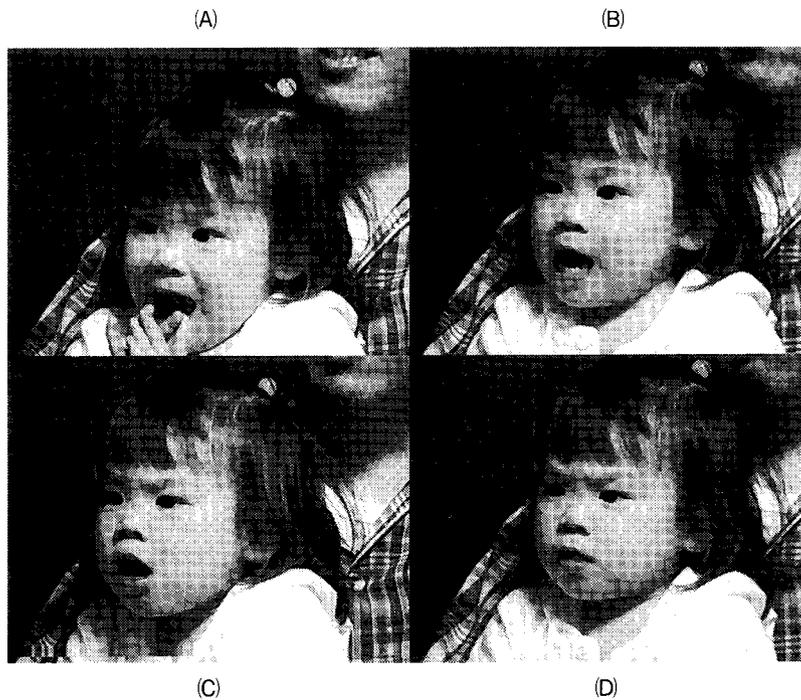


Figure 1-(b) The girl (2 years old) showed Type1 (Self) behavior. While intently watching the scene of the video (Figure1-a), she suddenly comprehends herself (A). After calling her own name with a self conscious smile (B and C), her face became serious (D).



Figure 2-(a) A conflicting scene from a dining table. The boy (18 months old) was upset with himself and his clumsiness in manipulating chopsticks.

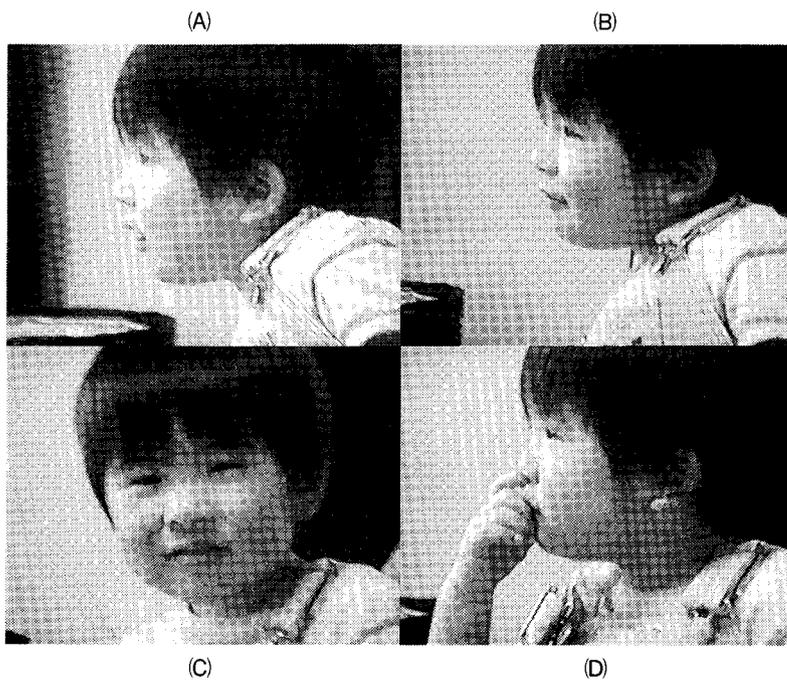


Figure 2-(b) The boy (2 years old) showed Type1 (Self) behavior. He leaned forward (A), smiled a wry smile (B), mimicked his own crying face (C), and gave a suspicious look (D).



Figure 3-(a) A conflicting scene from a dining table. The girl (18 months old) failed to give the food on the spoon to her father. Her father responded negatively.

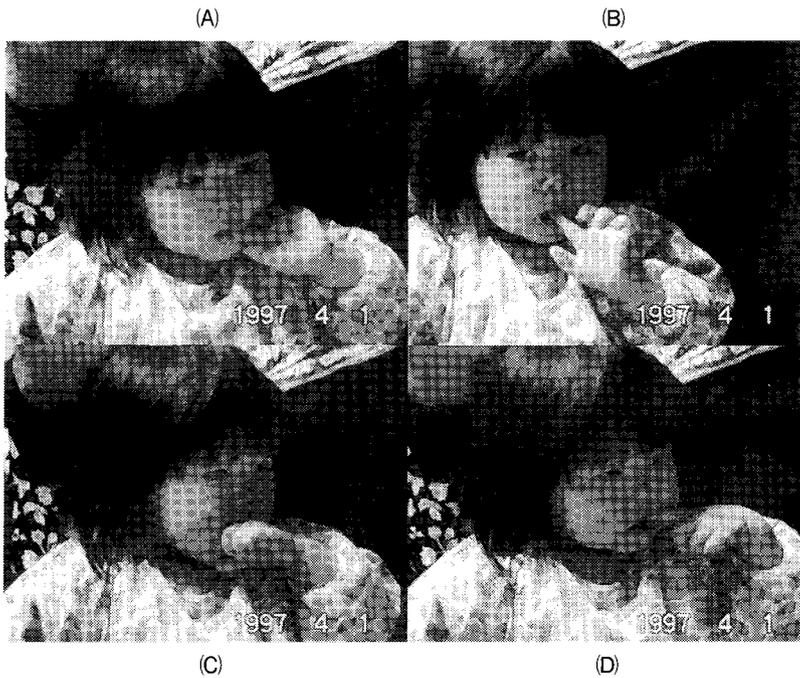


Figure 3-(b) The girl (2 years old) showed Type3 (No Reference) behavior. She watched intently while restlessly finger sucking. Her behavior showed embarrassment or shame (A, B, C, and D)

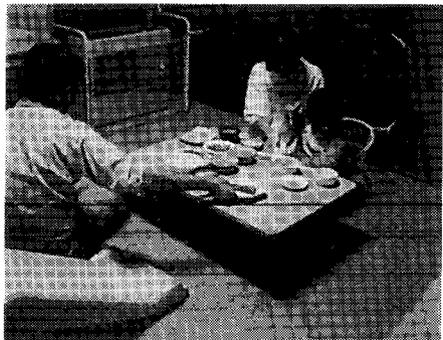


Figure 4-(a) A normal scene where the family members started to eat.



Figure 4-(b) The girl jumped with joy and spontaneously said, "Ah! There is mama and papa."



Figure 5-(a) A normal scene where the mother asked her daughter what she wanted to eat.



Figure 5-(b) The girl was delighted to see the scene (Figure 5-a), and she spontaneously uttered "mama" in response to the images of her mother.

special motives for learning how to share experiences of the world with other persons through their sensitivity. Reddy also argued infants' sensitivity to laughter and directing others' attention to acts by self. It may be helpful to discuss the results from their viewpoint. When the scene was a harmonious one, they could tune in the images of the videotape. They shared the joy with other family members while watching the harmonious scenes together. When the scene was a conflicting one, they exhibited suspicious looks frequently as if they keenly tried to understand the meaning of the replayed emotional communication for themselves. Although they socially referred to their parents or siblings, they were never influenced by others' appreciation of the scene. Nonverbal behavior like this may be regarded as the manifestation of reflective self consciousness.

In some recent research (Bråten,1988,1996 ; Nakano,1997), much attention was given theoretically to intersubjectivity. Further investigation is needed in order to clarify how children's intersubjective experiences through family relationships contribute to their development of self. Methodologically narrative approaches may be very helpful for my future research.

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