

Status seeking: The importance of roles in early social cognition

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What do children want? Although Freud may not have asked this question directly, his implicit answer shaped a dominant perspective on social cognitive development. Children are little egoists. They want gratification of their intrinsic, individual drives and desires. To turn these egoists into social beings requires significant effort, external force, and to some degree, distortion of basic psychological processes. Freud's perspective also fit with a particular evolutionary view of the competitive, individual basis of human nature. The asocial view of childhood has been challenged, both from within evolutionary biology, where social adaptations may be cooperative as well as competitive (Sober & Wilson, 1998), and by socio-cultural perspectives on development (Tomasello, 1999). Something of the individual egoist persists, though, in our study of children's social cognition. We may not view children (solely) as selfish maximizers anymore, but our theories of social cognition often suggest they see themselves and others in this way. The point of this essay is to illustrate the value of an alternative set of constructs and perspectives on social cognition. The core concept is that of social status. Children understand themselves and other people in terms of positions within a social structure. What do children want (and want to know about)? Status.

In common usage, "status" connotes possession of privilege or power. Status is often conceptualized with respect to a dominance hierarchy in which those with

lower status defer to those with higher status. Although some kinds of dominance may involve status, status is broader than dominance. The broad sense is clear in Searle's theory of status functions (Searle, 1995). For Searle the core of status is the designation of "counting as." For X to have status A means that there is some context in which X "counts as" A. Counting-as is an ascribed property, subjective in the sense that things only have status because people decide or believe they do. Thus status is distinct from affordances or utilities (e.g., X works well as an A). For example, consider the status of being a doctor. A doctor may have many intrinsic qualities, certain skills or knowledge (e.g., of medicine) and historical properties (e.g., has attended medical school). However being a doctor, having the status, does not consist of possessing any of those properties. What makes someone a doctor is the agreement of others that the person counts as one. The intrinsic properties may affect the assignment of status (we will not deem someone a doctor who has not attended medical school), but they do not constitute status.

What good is status? Ex hypothesi somebody could have all the skills, knowledge, and training of a doctor but not be one because the status is unrecognized.

Conversely lacking characteristic abilities is not inconsistent with being a doctor (What do you call the person who graduated bottom of his class in med school?).

Who would you want treating your illness? Status is no guarantee. However, whose care will your HMO reimburse? Whose prescription will your pharmacy fill? The person with status. Searle notes that the implications of status are purely normative.

Having status means people ought to treat the person as a doctor, and the doctor ought to behave as one. Status carries with it rights and duties. Doctors are allowed

to do certain things (e.g., write prescriptions, bill HMOs), and obligated to do certain others (e.g., respect patient confidentiality). Learning about the status of “doctor” provides a set of normative expectations. What the status of doctor is “good for,” is knowing how a doctor is obligated to behave, and how others are obligated to behave with respect to one.

The doctor example illustrates one class of status, social roles. “Doctor” is a particularly clear case because there are formal statements of criteria for achieving the status, and regulations laying out powers and permissions. Other social roles are more informal. For example, what rights and obligations are due someone filling the role of “father”? Norms of appropriate behavior are often vague, contested, and variable. So too are the criteria for status assignment. In non-traditional families, or cases of sperm donation, it is not always clear who “counts as” a father. There are many kinds of statuses besides social roles. The clearest cases are regulated actions, such as traffic laws (what counts as a “full stop”) and rule of games (what counts as a “touchdown”, see (Rakoczy, 2008)). As with social roles there is likely a continuum from formal to informal statuses for actions. Object functions are another large class of statuses (what counts as a “hammer”). For Searle, the most interesting class of status is linguistic (what counts as the word for dog) because such status assignments serve as the basis for other statuses (because “promise” has the meaning it does, saying “I promise” conveys the status of having promised). Ownership is another, perhaps paradigmatic example (what counts as “mine”, (Kalish & Anderson, in press)).

Status is particularly interesting in the context of social cognitive development for at least two reasons. First, the phenomena that are most centrally social are all statuses. Searle argues that all social constructions and institutions are statuses. Second, status cognition is ineluctably social.

The statuses discussed above are characterized as social conventions within Social Domain Theory (Turiel, 1983). As conventions, statuses are kinds of social agreements; they are arrangements to organize interpersonal interactions. As such, status requires more than one person. The minimal case is something like a promise between two people (see Astington, 1988; Mant & Perner, 1988 on children's understanding of promising). More generally, Tomasello and his colleagues have explored the ways that statuses may emerge from shared intentions in interpersonal interactions (Tomasello, 2009). How and when children understand the interpersonal conditions of status assignments are still very much open questions (Kalish & Cornelius, 2007; Kalish, Weissman, & Bernstein, 2000; Kim & Kalish, 2009). The key point though is that statuses are social objects. My promise to you does not consist in your having a particular belief (e.g., that I promised), nor in my having a particular belief, or even in us both independently having those beliefs. Rather, something like shared belief is necessary.

Although the paradigmatic examples of statuses, and the ones of concern in this essay, are conventions, it is at least possible to conceive of something like "natural" status (Kalish, 2005). Research in moral development confirms that quite young children share the intuition with many adults that "moral status" does not depend

on people's beliefs or intentions (Turiel, 1983). That is, theft is wrong whether or not anyone knows it.<sup>1</sup> Regardless of whether a status is discovered or invented, it is always the case that any causal consequences depend on people recognizing it: The causal effects of status "run through" intentional causal chains. The classic error in this regard is Piaget's example of immanent justice (Jose, 1990). Immanent justice is the belief that (at least some) consequences of having status are not mind-dependent. The thief will get sick or suffer some unlucky fate, whether or not anyone knows about his transgression. In some sense, then, the key developmental question regarding status is when children appreciate its exclusively mind-dependent effects (Kalish, 1998). Interestingly, it is not clear that adults see the consequences of moral transgressions as mind-dependent (Raman & Winer, 2004), and such beliefs seem culturally dependent (e.g., the concept of karma). It is unclear whether we should say that many people lack the concept of status, or whether they think that moral violations involve something besides or in addition to status.

There are interesting and important developmental questions relating to children's understanding of the sources and consequences of status. Framing questions in these terms may unite some currently diverse lines of developmental research (Kalish & Sabbagh, 2007). For example, questions about the role of creator's intent in determining object function can be recast in terms of how objects come to count as one kind rather than another. However, for the remainder of this essay I would

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<sup>1</sup> Note that this is not to say that the beliefs and intentions of the violator don't matter. To judge that "intentionally taking something that does not belong to you" counts as theft does involve consideration of mental states. However, whether such an act counts as theft may not depend on what anyone thinks.

like to turn to a different set of status implications. Having described status in general, the focus now turns to a specific class of statuses: Social Roles.

The core meaning of status is how you ought to use or behave toward some thing or person, and how some thing or person ought to work for (function) or behave toward you. A social role is a set of these kinds of normative expectations for a class of persons (Linton, 1936). To inhabit a social role is to possess a set of rights and duties. To understand a social role is to know what is permitted to and required of someone in the role. Although there has been some attention to role concepts within social cognitive development (Watson, 1984) by and large children's conceptions of social categories have not been construed in these terms. This is a serious omission. Social roles are an important and distinctive perspective on social categories, and may be especially important and distinctive early in development.

Role expectations have been a major focus of research on the development of gender concepts. It is well known that children (and adults) see gender in normative terms: boys and girls are allowed and required to do different things (Blakemore, 2003). For example, playing with dolls is an appropriate behavior for a girl, but a kind of violation for a boy. Gender norms present something of a puzzle for developmental accounts; what is it that gives gender this normative force? Typically the answer is located in social sanctions (society punishes gender inconsistent behavior), or in identity construction (if one's self-concept depends on gender then challenges to gendered expectations are threatening, for review see Martin, Ruble, & Szkrybalo, 2002). Thus some special feature or significance of gender explains

gender roles. An alternative perspective, though, is that role expectations are central to most, if not all, social categories; the cognitive function of social categories is to provide normative expectations.

Preschool-aged children are quick to associate norms with social categories. For example they expect members of novel social categories to share rights and duties, more so than preferences or emotional reactions (Kalish & Lawson, 2008).

Normative properties generalize from one category member to another. Young children are somewhat less willing to generalize norms in the context of particular individuals, and are more likely to generalize norms than psychological states within categories (Kalish, under review). While school-aged children and adults often expect social categories to be organized around, and predictive of, psychological qualities (e.g., traits), young children may be most attentive to rights and duties. In particular, this work with novel social categories illustrates that experience with social sanction and identity-relevance are not necessary for the attribution of normative significance to social categories.

Role concepts fit well with the theory that scripts play an important role in early social cognition (Nelson, Gruendel, Franklin, & Barten, 1988). Though scripts are often characterized as simple empirical generalization of observed co-occurrences (Gopnik & Wellman, 1994) there is more to them than that. Scripts encode normative, not just statistical, expectations. The restaurant script tells us more than just that customers typically give their order to waiters, who then bring the food. Such interactions are constitutive of the roles of “customer” or “waiter.” To “count

as” a customer in this context just is to have a normative way of interacting with people who “count as” waiters. It might be possible to learn regular patterns of social interactions as bare probabilities, but many suspect people rarely do so (Gilbert, 1992; Kalish & Sabbagh, 2007). If customers typically give their orders to waiters (in a particular kind of restaurant), then the representation encoded in a script is that this is proper, normatively expected behavior. The converse holds as well; if some behavior is normatively expected then it is statistically expected.

People tend to do what they are supposed to. For adults, this expectation is based on a kind of rationality assumption. If young children really adhere to something like immanent justice, they may see a more direct connection between roles and behaviors. Note that these representations need not involve attributions of personalities or traits: We don’t conclude that waiters particularly like being ordered about by customers, nor that customers are “bossy” just by fulfilling their role expectations.

Recognizing the link to scripts highlights an important feature of roles: they are typically inter-defined. Learning the role of doctor involves learning how doctors are obligated/allowed to interact with people in other roles, such as nurses, patients, and pharmacists. The same relation holds with less formal roles, such as the pragmatics governing interactions between participants in a dialogue.

Tomasello (2009) argues that this kind of mutual constitution provides children with powerful learning opportunities. By construing a social interaction in terms of “my role” and “your role” the child acquires a kind of third-party view of the interaction. Understanding my role depends on understanding yours, because I



have to know what you expect of me and what I can expect of you. So, for example, by being a patient a child learns something about what it is to be a doctor. Thinking about how these roles are coordinated, what part each person plays, also provides a more generalized, non-egocentric view of the interaction. By learning the patient role, the child learns something of the script or context “visits to the doctor.”

The general point of a status-based approach is that the social world has an essentially normative structure. Much of what children have to learn is how they and others ought to behave. The empirical hypothesis is that children are motivated to seek out this information, and represent social actors and objects in terms of norms. One important class of status concerns social roles.

Research on social cognition has often been motivated by a desire to understand the origins of various errors or evils. We know that principles of category learning can result in stereotypes: generalizations from a few individuals to all members of a social category. Prejudice, ascription of value or valence to social categories, may develop from representations of in-group/out-group distinctions. Thinking about social status leads directly to discrimination: the assignment of differential rights and obligations based on social category. While young children may be prone to stereotyping, and hold some prejudiced attitudes, they may be particularly likely to discriminate. From the status perspective, making discriminatory judgments is what social cognition is all about.

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