

## A DEVELOPMENTAL PERSPECTIVE ON BEHAVIORAL DETERMINANTS \*

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This paper presents a developmental perspective on behavioral determinants which integrates some aspects of the Piagetian and Gibsonian theories as well as some basic postulates of AI theories. This developmental model is summarized in a series of assertions and illustrated by examples of various kinds of behavior. It assumes that three qualitatively different changes in behavioral determinants take place between birth and 18 years; this assumption means that the link between sensory information and action undergoes several transformations during development. Moreover, within each stage, behavior is determined by the degree of development of the subject's representation of objects and of himself. The initial state of behavior at birth is particularly discussed in this paper, with regard to imitation ability and auditory-visual coordination. The issue is whether or not development begins from a differentiated or non-differentiated subject-object relationship.

### Introduction

An individual's behavior, whether the individual is a child or an adult, is the result of the combined influences of various determinants rather than being dependent on a single determinant. Some of them are external to the subject, as for example, stimuli with their idiosyncratic properties and contexts. Others are internal to the subject, as for example, knowledge, expectation, goals... From a developmental point of view, there is no doubt that behavior determinants change, both those that elicit behavior and those that control it. These changes can

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affect independently either the eliciting determinants or the structures of control. For instance, the newborn's smiling is distinguished from the 3-month-old infant's smiling with regard to the structures of control of this behavior: smiling passes from an endogenous to an exogenous control (Emde 1980). Smiling at 3 months is elicited by the forehead-eyes-nose Gestalt whereas, at 10 months, it is elicited by complex stimuli, within which familiarity is surely relevant (Spitz 1956).

The appearance of new behavior is, on the contrary, most commonly related to the appearance of new control structures of behavior. From this perspective, two categories of behavior determinants are traditionally distinguished in psychology: perceptual or sensori-motor determinants and cognitive or conceptual determinants, the notion of representation playing a key role in this distinction. Within either the Piagetian or the Gibsonian framework, perception or sensori-motor activity is supposed to be direct, although what Piaget means by direct knowledge of reality is different from the Gibsonian thesis of direct perception. For Piaget, perception is direct in the sense that action is intimately linked to sensory information. Nevertheless, the sensori-motor schemes of Piaget, defined as closed sets of perceptions and movements, constitute mediations between the subject and the object, within which the perceptions are constructed. In contrast to Piaget, Gibson does not postulate the existence of such mediations: according to him, all the properties of reality can be transmitted directly to the subject. The properties are, therefore, to be extracted rather than constructed.

In this paper, we will present a developmental model (Mounoud 1976, 1981; Mounoud and Vinter 1981a), which, like Gibson's theory, maintains the ecological meaning of perception. But, in line with a basic postulate of AI theories, we will claim that this meaning is provided by the subject's *representations*, the intervention of which precede the application of a sensori-motor scheme, because they are in fact responsible for its selection. Representations have at least two functions with regard to actions: they are responsible for their selection and for their monitoring. Perception is thus seen as 'a process whereby we make sense of the world outside in terms of the meanings of a world within' (Oatley 1981). Moreover, the model maintains that properties of the external world are discovered through the activity of the subject. In line with Piaget, we assume that it is by means of the *construction* of new representations that the child discovers new properties of the object and of himself. The properties are thus constructed and not

extracted, as postulated by Gibson; even if they are available in the external world, they cannot be directly perceived by the subject. In contrast to Piaget, however, Mounoud (1981) considers the *formal* or *operative* aspects of the cognitive structures to be *performed* but not constructed.

### **A developmental model**

The basic postulate of this model is that perception and action are linked by representational systems at all stages of development. In order to account for ongoing behavior, a dynamic view of the notion of representation is needed. Representation can be defined as an internal organization of contents, of the different properties of objects, situations or events, i.e., as the result of a top-down process. It can also be seen as the result of information selection and information-processing activities, i.e., as the result of a bottom-up process. The term 'code' is used to mean the set of formal operations or rules which transform or translate the information related to objects or actions. The code thus plays the role of an internal determinant which controls behavior, i.e., perception as well as action. A representation is conceived of as a translation of information by means of a particular code. The subject's procedures or action programs result from the combination of representations with formal structures. Let us now examine this model through different assertions.

*Assertion 1.* From birth, infants possess representations of the body.

One particular neonatal behavior clearly demonstrates the need to postulate the existence of representations since birth, that is, the so-called early imitation ability. To date, it has been demonstrated that neonates reproduce three different facial gestures and two manual movements (Maratos 1973; Meltzoff and Moore 1977; Vinter 1985) and imitate different facial expressions (Field et al. 1982). Other studies, however, disprove the early presence of imitation of almost all these models (Hayes and Watson 1981; McKenzie and Over 1983; see Meltzoff and Moore (1983) for a methodological debate of these studies). What is certainly true is that the imitation ability is limited at birth. In any case, to imitate a movement requires the identification of

the part of the body involved and an intermodal matching between the perceived model's movement and one's own body movement. Both processes, that of identification and that of intermodal matching, must be based on an internal representation of the body. The fact that imitations are not well differentiated can be explained by the assumption that the representation is global and fairly imprecise at birth. From the various studies cited above, we can hypothesize that the representation of the face, especially the mouth region, is the most differentiated.

*Assertion 2.* During the neonatal period, the sensori-motor coordinations are under the control of the sensorial representation system. Within this system, a differentiation between an external space and bodily space is not possible.

It has been shown that neonates correctly orient their head and eyes toward a voice or a sound. But a more complex coordination between audition and vision seems to exist at birth. To investigate this coordination, several authors have used a particular paradigm in which visual and auditory information are simultaneously presented to the subject in a spatially discordant way. According to Aronson and Rosenbloom (1971), one-month-old infants become surprised and distressed in the discordant situation as if they expected the visual (face) and the auditory (voice) stimulus to appear in the same location. Castillo and Butterworth (1981) observed that neonates resolved the conflict in favor of vision, by turning preferentially toward the visual source and apparently ignoring the auditory stimulation. Vinter et al. (1984) observed that neonates turned almost as much to the voice as to the face at first, but that neonates who oriented to the voice first, subsequently turned to the face. The reverse, going from the face to the voice, was rarely observed. It seems that neonates are more 'troubled' by hearing something without concordant visual stimulation than by being visually stimulated and hearing something elsewhere. In my opinion, when neonates turn their head and eyes toward a sound, it does not mean that they expect to see something located in an external space. Rather it indicates that, upon hearing a voice, a visual stimulation is anticipated without any particular expectancy about the object's properties and location. The expectancy of the visual system would be fulfilled whether the visual stimulus is a human face or any inanimate object (and irrespective of its location).

The neonatal behavioral organization is thus based on intersensory-motor coordinations which presuppose a coordinated intersensory space or a geometrically organized bodily space. When the newborn turns the head or eyes toward a sound, it does not necessarily follow that s/he is able to *localize* the sound in space, i.e., that s/he has available an internal representation of that stimulus' spatial relations to other stimuli and/or the subject her/himself. In the present model, *orientation* behavior of the newborn is conceived of as an automatic response which merely requires a bodily space organized according to a more or less rudimentary geometry. When an auditory stimulation reaches the right (left) ear, the head/eyes turn to the right (left) side.

The particular mode of relationship which exists between the neonate and the environment is brought about by bi-univocal linkages based on sensory translations of incoming information: to a particular configuration of stimuli, the neonate automatically responds by a particular behavior. In this sense, I agree that perception is direct at birth. But the visual, auditory, tactile... stimulations the infant reacts to do not have the meaning of perceptible external events or objects.

Accordingly, perception in a strict sense does not exist at birth, because incoming sensory information, structured of course, cannot be distinctively related by the newborn to meaningful external (or internal) events or objects. The infant will have to attribute objective meanings to the pre-structured sensory information, i.e., to construct perceptive representations of the world and of himself. The sensory and motor systems are completely intertwined at birth: they are not decomposable. Perception in a strict sense appears when a modular system appears, in which linkages between sensory and motor information are independently articulated with the external world and the body.

*Assertion 3.* During the neonatal period, a new code, the perceptive code, appears due to a maturational process. The initial sensory-motor coordinations will be progressively reconstructed within a new perceptuo-motor organization. By means of the perceptive code, the infant will bring about a new selection and processing of sensory information related to both her/his actions and external objects. A differentiation between external space and bodily space will be progressively established.

Let us first use a metaphor to illustrate this point. A European adult perceives very precisely the shapes of Chinese characters, their spatial

organization: s/he can discriminate one from the other, assimilate one to a house for example, another to a tree . . . , but s/he does not perceive their intrinsic meaning within the Chinese language. As soon as s/he starts learning Chinese (i.e., learning a new code), s/he will lose her/his initial way of perceiving the characters (s/he is not longer able to perceive a tree or a house), but will progressively understand their objective meaning. Perception itself will probably change: the characters will be perceived according to a different spatial organization, eye scan paths will be different. The neonate is in a very similar position: due to the sensory code, s/he is able to structure incoming information, but not to refer this information to particular objects, events or to her/himself. The perceptive code will be needed to construct these meanings.

To what extent does the development of the initial intersensori-motor coordinations support this view? The imitation ability, for instance, disappears in the first months of life. I found that at 2 months, infants no longer imitate the hand opening-closing movement, and at 3 months, the tongue protrusion model no longer elicits imitation responses (Vinter 1985). The development of visuo-auditory coordination and of eye-hand coordination undergo a similar process (Von Hofsten 1982; Muir et al. 1980; Vinter et al. 1982; White et al. 1964). I believe these apparent disappearances to be a consequence of the reconstruction of the sensorimotor coordinations within the perceptuomotor organization. Each constituent of each coordination is progressively recoded by the perceptive code, and thus, the coordination as such no longer exists.

But if the 3-month-old infant does not imitate the facial or the manual model, we may wonder how s/he does react to these models. Vinter (1985) has shown that, in response to the manual model, 3-month-old infants look at their own hand but vocalize and smile at the experimenter when she is performing the facial model. By looking at her/his hand, the infant realizes a partial matching between the model's manual movement and her/his own hand activity, based on the similarity of the body parts involved. Similarly, I consider smiling and vocalizing as 'analogical' imitations of the facial model in the sense that infants respond to the facial features that have become meaningful for them .

Similarly the visuo-auditory coordination development reveals the progressive differentiation between the external and the bodily spaces.

At 4 months, when visual and auditory information are spatially discordant, infants first turn as much to the face as to the voice, as neonates do, but then go repeatedly from one to the other (Vinter et al. 1982). These frequent head and eye movements from the visual to the auditory stimulus, and vice versa, show that the latter are related to each other as two sources of information that should share a common location.

*Assertion 4.* The link between sensory information and actions undergoes a second reconstruction between 2 and 9–10 years, due to the appearance of the conceptual code, and a third reconstruction between 10 and 18 years, due to the appearance of the formal code. Three qualitatively different systems of representations and procedures are thus successively constructed by the child.

Mounoud and his colleagues (Mounoud and Hauert 1982; Mounoud et al. 1983; Hauert 1980) have shown that action characteristics undergo a redefinition during the conceptual stage, which means that development of conceptual knowledge involves new transformations of perceptuo-motor organization. They investigated the development, from 2 to 9 years, of the kinematic aspects of lifting objects and of visuo-manual tracking. If, in fact, the developing conceptualization affects the perceptuo-motor organization, the action's kinematic characteristic (amplitude, velocity, acceleration) must constitute valid indicators of the subject's conceptual elaboration. 'Ballistic' movements, for example, can be produced if the subject has a representation that entirely specifies the situation. On the other hand, discontinuous movements can reveal how inadequate or incomplete the current representations of the subject are. Such results are reported in Mounoud and Hauert (1982).

This link between the perceptuo-motor and the conceptuo-motor organizations has been studied in another perspective. Mounoud and Bower (1974) have shown that a typical example of conceptual knowledge, permanence of weight, is constructed also during the perceptuo-motor stage. Using verbal judgments, Piaget and Inhelder (1951) established that 7–8-year-olds understand the weight of an object to be invariant whatever its shape may be. By analyzing the mechanical parameters of the grasping action, Mounoud and Bower revealed the existence of a perceptuo-motor behavioral form of weight conservation at around 16 months.

Finally, through the study of self-image recognition, we have investigated the third 'revolution' in behavioral determinants which takes place at around 10 years (Mounoud and Vinter 1981b). Three- to 15-year-olds were confronted with a deforming mirror made of a sheet of flexible chromed plastic with a handle at its base. Rotations of the handle bent the metal frame and thus engendered convex or concave distortions in the vertical axis of the mirror. Starting from either a maximum convex or maximum concave position of the mirror, subjects were asked to adjust the mirror until it reflected their 'objective' image. The results were analyzed in terms of precision and stability through the experimental conditions of the chosen images. To summarize the results, 12 and 13-year-olds were very similar to 4 and 5-year-olds – they selected imprecise and unstable images – whereas 14–15-year-olds were close to 6-year-olds – they chose precise and stable images. Those results show that recognition of one's own image undergoes a process of reconstruction during adolescence, and more interestingly, that its development is repeated through phases which are similar to those existing earlier, between 3 and 10 years.

*Assertion 5.* Within each stage, children construct representations of the external world and of their body. According to the model, the construction process takes place in three phases that will be described with regard to the perceptuo-motor stage and illustrated by describing various kinds of behavior.

– First phase, achieved at around 2–3 months.

The first kind of representations that the infant constructs are partial and juxtaposed one to the other. By means of the perceptive code, the infant discovers and differentiates the different properties of objects, of her/his body and of her/his actions. But initially, few properties are meaningful, and they are not coordinated with respect to each other. The smiling response of the 3-month-old infant, for example, demonstrates the existence of a partial representation of the human face. Only a few features are significant. On the basis of these features, a differentiation between two different faces is not possible. The object does not have a completely independent identity at this point.

A very similar state of coordination between the sensory spaces exists at this age. Between 2 and 3 months, it becomes difficult to elicit



a head or eye movement in response to auditory stimulation (Field et al. 1980; Vinter et al. 1982). Auditory and visual information are no longer coordinated. This is also the case between vision and proprioception: imitation, prehension cannot be elicited. This state of non-coordination signifies that a single object can give rise to different representations, just as if these representations were referred to different objects.

As the infant's representations are incomplete and elementary, her/his ability to anticipate is restricted. As far as motor control is concerned, only local predictions are possible, which alternate with elementary corrections without their being integrated. The different phases of action are dissociated. Reaching behavior of a 2-month-old infant shows that the visual capture of a target, the arm approach, and the grasp phases are not coordinated with each other, as they were at birth, but develop separately (White et al. 1964).

– Second phase, achieved at around 6–8 months.

During this phase, previous partial representations become coordinated with each other and give rise to total or complete representations. For the infant, objects, like her/himself, acquire an independent existence and her/his behaviors are again based on coordinations. The actions are adjusted to the various properties of objects. But the identification of an object only occurs if all the properties the infant has been able to discover in it are visible (Widmer-Robert-Tissot 1980). The representations at this level are thus complete, but rigid and not decomposable.

The infant's search behavior in relation to hidden objects demonstrates her/his new understanding of object identity. At about 8 months, s/he is able to move a screen to reach a hidden object behind it. But s/he will continue to search at the initial location A even after having seen the same object moved to a new location B. We propose to interpret this error (called the stage-four error) as a demonstration of the rigidity or non-decomposability of the infant's representations. Searching for an object at B presupposes in fact that the infant understands that the property 'location' can take different values without the identity of the object being altered. And in order to grasp that a property can be 'modulable', it is necessary to construct systems of intra- and inter-object relationships.

This rigidity also characterizes the actions of the subject. At this level, actions cannot be modified while they are being executed. Actions can be completely preprogrammed but the infant's capacity for correction is limited and takes the following form: an initial action having been carried out, the subject evaluates the difference between the expected goal and the achieved goal so that a correction can be introduced in the planning of the subsequent action. This rigidity of action can be illustrated by the Mounoud and Bower study (1974), in which they analyzed the grasping action characteristics in relation to modifications of the object's weight. When a light object is suddenly substituted for a heavy object, both objects being otherwise identical, 6–7-month-old infants do not show much of the reaction shown by older infants: the arm does not suddenly rise, and the speed of the movement is not modified. Moreover, these infants do not show significant variations in their prehension when handed successively different objects, presented in an increasing or decreasing order with respect to their size and weight. This reveals that, at this age, infants have a rigid style of prehension which is functionally adapted to grasping objects of different weights, but ignores their differences. The movements are globally preprogrammed, in a non-specific way.

–Third phase, achieved at around 16–18 months.

The rigid representations become decomposable, just as actions become adapted as a result of variations in the properties of objects or situations. This phase can be subdivided into two steps: a process of dissociation is predominant during the first step, a process of synthesis appears later. These processes refer to parts of the objects in such a way that relationships between different parts of the object or between different objects are established. Similarly, they relate to parts of the actions or of the body in such a way that relationships between different parts of the action or of the body or between parts of the action or of the body and situational variations are established (Mounoud 1983).

At this level, it is possible to speak in terms of direct perception: action is intimately linked to sensory information. But this apparent direct aspect is a consequence of the high degree of elaboration and efficiency of the perceptuo-motor behavioral organization. The bio-mechanical laws of movement established by Turvey and colleagues

(what is reachable, climbable...), based on relationships between parts of the body and situation variations, belong to this level, which reappears during the next stages of development, as well as the other levels.

The object acquires permanence during this phase. The 16–18-month-old infants can find an object even after it has been displaced invisibly. Its momentary disappearance is attributed to the establishment of a new system of relations – spatial, temporal or causal – between the subject and the object.

Evidence from imitation may also support this view. After 10 months, the infant becomes able to imitate new gestures, which at first need to be visible for her/him, whereas before, only familiar movements were reproduced (Piaget 1946). Imitation of new gestures requires that an infant's representations can integrate variations; such integration is not possible until representations are decomposable, at least partially.

Since action is decomposable, corrections can be introduced in the course of its execution and immediately integrated into the program which is responsible for the general planning of the action. A combined control, in open and closed loop, characterizes this level. We again can make use of the results of Mounoud and Bower's study to illustrate this phase. Nine to 13-month-olds show a very striking reaction to the substitution trial, in which a light object is substituted for a heavy object without the infants noticing the change. Between 9 and 10 months, the arm suddenly rises, and between 11 and 13 months, the speed of the movement increases while the arm's course is deviated. In response to the seriation of objects, arm drops are proportional to the object's weight in 9–10-month-olds, while the speed of arm movements is proportional to the object's weight in 11–13-month-olds. These results show that at this age (first step of this phase), infants do not specifically anticipate the weight of the object, the performed movements being modulated by the weight variations. Subjects are mastering the relationships between parts of their action and situational variations. At 14–16 months, infants are able to predict weight variations and to develop a strength which is proportional to their anticipation. In response to the substitution trial, their arm also rises, but this is quickly corrected. Moreover, they manage to grasp the different objects of the seriation in a similar manner, which shows that they infer the object's weight from its size.

## Conclusion

Three qualitatively different changes in behavior determinants occur between birth and 18 years: passage from a sensorial to a perceptive control, then to a conceptual control, and then to a formal control. Moreover, within each stage, behavior is determined by the degree of development of the subject's representations: they are successively partial, then complete and rigid, then complete and decomposable.

In conclusion, we would like to hypothesize that taking the developmental sequence relative to the representations' construction as a hypothetical model for the acquisition of skills in adults could be a fruitful avenue of research.

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