

Another Look at the Theoretical Assumptions of Adolescent Egocentrism

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We attempt in this paper to reevaluate the theoretical assumptions of D. Elkind's theory of adolescent egocentrism *Child Development*, 38, 1025-1034). We argue that the construct is not well placed in the ontogenetic context of Piagetian logical development, and that the theory cannot account for stage transition or the appearance of the imaginary audience (IA) and personal fable (PF) components. We argue that the IA and PF constructions are better understood as problems in interpersonal understanding. These components are reinterpreted in terms of stage sequence that describes the ontogenesis of interpersonal understanding. The advantages of this model are highlighted. © 1985 Academic Press, Inc.

The concept of adolescent egocentrism as developed by Elkind (1967) has become an increasingly popular construct for understanding the nature of adolescent cognition and its relationship to commonly observed adolescent behaviors. The theoretical framework of adolescent egocentrism is distinctly developmental and Piagetian. This construct is generally conceived to be the natural outcome of the emergence of formal operational thought. The theoretical rationale for posing such a relationship devolves from the view that a unique form of egocentrism emerges in each stage of Piagetian cognitive development, with adolescent egocentrism being the variety characteristic of formal thought. That is, adolescent egocentrism is to be understood in the context of the ontogenetic changes in egocentrism which characterizes logical development from the sensorimotor stage to formal operations. The purpose of this article is to reexamine the theoretical assumptions of adolescent egocentrism. We argue that the traditional and heretofore unchallenged theoretical framework of adolescent egocentrism is implausible in light of recent advances in our understanding of social cognitive development, advances that were not available at the time the original theoretical position was outlined. In

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our view, egocentrism (and to a lesser extent, formal operations) has little to do with adolescent behaviors associated with the "imaginary audience" and "personal fable" components of Elkind's adolescent egocentrism. We argue that these latter concepts are more directly related to levels of role taking in adolescence. A reformulation of the construct in terms of *social* cognitive development is seen to better account of the commonly observed behaviors that are associated with the construct.

To develop our argument it will prove useful to review the theoretical parameters of adolescent egocentrism as outlined by Elkind (1967). Particular focus is placed on the different forms of egocentrism which emerge in earlier cognitive-developmental stages. Every major review of this construct has proceeded in such a fashion (e.g., Looft, 1971; Muuss, 1982), presumably reflecting the consensus that adolescent egocentrism is best understood in this historical context. However, a reconsideration of the ontogenetic history of egocentrism, particularly the transition mechanism from one form to the next, will prove instructive for our reevaluation of the theoretical consistency of adolescent egocentrism.

THE ONTOGENETIC CONTEXT OF ADOLESCENT EGOCENTRISM

The term egocentrism generally refers to a lack of differentiation between some aspect of self and object. According to Elkind (1967) the egocentrism of the sensorimotor stage of Piagetian development is reflected primarily in the lack of object permanence. The infant fails to differentiate between the *existence* of objects and his/her *experience* with them. When a visible object is removed from sight, the infant fails to engage in search behaviors, which has been interpreted as indicating a lack of belief in the existence of the object. Objects exist for the child only when he/she experiences them with extant sensorimotor schemes. However, with the emergence of the stage of preoperations, the child becomes progressively freed from object egocentrism. Preoperations coincide with the development of the symbolic functions, which now permit the child to form mental representations of absent objects. The child can now differentiate between the existence of objects and her experience with them, because now "experience" can be *mental* experience, objects can be symbolically present, even though they may not be physically so.

According to Elkind (1967), the new mental power associated with preoperations is itself limited by a type of egocentrism with respect to symbols. This type of egocentrism is typified by symbolic realism, particularly with regard to linguistic behavior. The child fails to differentiate between words and their referents. For example, the preoperational child believes that names of objects inhere in the matter, are attributes of the objects, and are not conventional but arbitrary symbolic signs for objects. As with sensorimotor (object) egocentrism of the previous stage, the

breakdown of this symbolic egocentrism is brought about by the emergence of the next stage in the sequence, namely, concrete operations. With concrete operations, the child can simultaneously differentiate two dimensions (as in, for example, the conservation tasks). This ability enables the child to separate linguistic symbol and referent and to hold them in his/her mind simultaneously, and thus distinguish between them.

However, while concrete operations frees the child from symbolic egocentrism, it also brings about a new variant of egocentrism peculiar to concrete operations. The preadolescent, impressed with the power of his/her own mental reasoning, fails to differentiate between the products of his/her own reasoning and the givens of perceptions. Mental products are treated as objective "facts." Contrary evidence is denied or rationalized. According to Elkind, only in adolescence, with the emergence of formal operational thought, can the child distinguish between mental constructions and perceptual givens. Here the adolescent can entertain contrary-to-fact propositions, and can generate all the possible logical relations and combinations in an argument. Such reasoning, according to Elkind, is crucial for overcoming the solipsistic egocentrism of concrete operations, for "the young person discovers the arbitrariness of his own mental constructions" (Elkind, 1967, p. 1029).

Following the logic of the transformations of egocentrism to this point, it seems reasonable to hypothesize that formal operations, which liberated the preadolescent from the egocentrism of concrete operations, would concomitantly involve its own style of egocentrism. The previous stages provided for the conquest of objects, symbols, and perceptions. Formal operations will provide the battleground for the conquest of *thought*. However, the very skills that freed the child from the egocentrism of the previous stage ensnares the formal operator in a new form of egocentrism. With formal operations the adolescent can now conceptualize the thought of others. And while the formal operator can conceptualize his/her own thoughts, and the thoughts of others, he/she is nonetheless egocentric in that he/she "fails to differentiate between the objects toward which the thoughts of others are directed and those which are the focus of (her) own concern" (Elkind, 1967, p. 1029). In other words, while the adolescent can infer the points of view of others, what he/she infers is that others are thinking of him/her.

Adolescent egocentrism is manifested in two constructions, which are by now well known to adolescence researchers, namely, the *imaginary audience* (IA), and the *personal fable* (PF). The imaginary audience is the belief that others are as preoccupied with the adolescent's behavior and appearance as he/she is about himself/herself. The imaginary audience component is operationalized, at least in Elkind and Bowen's (1979) Imaginary Audience Scale, principally in terms of self-consciousness

(see, for example, Adams & Jones, 1981). That is, the presence of self-consciousness in social situations is thought to represent the operation of the imaginary audience. The second component, the personal fable, involves the individual's sense of personal uniqueness and indestructibility. This construct is not well operationalized in the Elkind and Bowen (1979) measure, though there is a separate personal fable subscale in the measure developed by Enright and his colleagues (Enright, Lapsley, & Shukla, 1979; Enright, Shukla, & Lapsley, 1980).

The imaginary audience and personal fable constructs are of great interest to researchers because they seem to account for a variety of adolescent behaviors. As noted above, the heightened self-consciousness of adolescence is related to the ever presence of admiring or critical (imaginary) audiences. The adolescent belief that their thoughts or feelings are understood by no one, least of all by parents, their sense of idealism, their belief in their own indestructibility (e.g., "pregnancy will never happen to me") can be associated with the personal fable. Yet, while these constructs have obvious heuristic power for explaining adolescent behavior, we can ask whether the constructs are best understood in the theoretical context of egocentrism.

A CRITIQUE OF ADOLESCENT EGOCENTRISM

With respect to the pattern of transitions from one form of egocentrism to the next, we can ask whether the theory is consistent with regard to the breakdown of adolescent egocentrism. According to Elkind (1967), adolescent egocentrism diminishes by the age of 15 or 16, which coincides with the consolidation of formal operational thought. But note that this explanation for the diminution of adolescent egocentrism is quite different from the explanation given for earlier transitions. The egocentrisms of the previous stages are *not* overcome by the consolidation of cognitive skills of that stage, but by the skills permitted by the emergence of the next stage. Sensorimotor egocentrism, for example, is not overcome by the consolidation of sensorimotor skills, but by the emergence of preoperations. Similarly, preoperational and concrete operational egocentrisms are not overcome by the consolidation of preoperations and concrete operations, respectively, but by the emergence of concrete and formal operations (again, respectively). Hence it is theoretically inconsistent to argue that adolescent egocentrism is diminished by the consolidation of formal operations. But this seems to be required, since there is obviously no Piagetian stage beyond formal operations. This seems to suggest that *adolescent* egocentrism is of a different order altogether, and cannot therefore be easily placed in context by reference to the ontogenetic history of egocentric transitions.

Elkind (1967) buttresses the consolidation hypothesis with the conjec-

ture that adolescent egocentrism could also diminish as a result of social interaction in later adolescence. According to this view intimacy and role experimentation provide the motivation for more accurate social understanding. The adolescent comes to realize that others have preoccupations that do not concern the self, that one is not normally the center of attention and the "axis of cause and effect," and that one is not so unique that one does not also share important commonalities with others. There is nothing controversial about this formulation except for the fact that it fits in rather awkwardly with the theoretical framework. It seems to suggest that interpersonal experiences play a decisive role in cognitive development only in late adolescence. The ontogenetic context of adolescent egocentrism up to late adolescence focuses on "cold" cognition in each of the preformal operations stages—objects, symbols, facts, perceptions. Now in adolescence cognition "warms up" to consider interpersonal experiences. Experiential factors are invoked to explain the decline of adolescent egocentrism precisely at the limits of formal operations for providing a useful exploratory framework. The theory, which has relied on an account of egocentric transitions in *cognitive* development "has had to submit to the indignity of importing a non-cognitive factor from outside the theory to make its developmental explanation appear complete" (Broughton, 1983, p. 232). However, it is doubtful whether personal experiences and interpersonal understanding are divorced from cognitive development at any stage of development. Thus, a more suitable theoretical framework must possess two features. It must first dispense with the need for a consolidation hypothesis, since it cannot be made to work in the case of adolescent egocentrism. In addition, the framework must place the construct in a theoretically consistent *social* cognitive–developmental context. By theoretically consistent we mean that the behaviors associated with adolescent egocentrism (IA and PF) must be seen as the natural outcome of social cognitive development up to that point, and that the diminution of these behaviors must be accounted for by the same mechanisms which governed previous stage transitions. Interpersonal understanding must not be introduced as a theoretical *deus ex machina* in order to account for transition.

We must also examine further the meaning of the term "adolescent egocentrism," for three very different types of analyses of it are possible. Recall that the crux of adolescent egocentrism is that while the adolescent can conceptualize both his own and the thoughts of another, what he conceptualizes is that the other is thinking of him (Elkind, 1967). It is as if the adolescent reasons in the following way:

When I think about myself, I realize that I am preoccupied with a set of self-features. I am self-preoccupied. When I think about *your* thoughts, about what

you are thinking, *I think* that you, too, are concerned about my self-features. You are as preoccupied with me as I am about myself.

There are certain difficulties with this formulation. The theory at once assumes that sophisticated role taking is and is not possible. If the adolescent can genuinely conceptualize the thoughts of others, is the egocentrism attribution error even possible? If the adolescent attributes his own self-concerns to the products of the thoughts of others what does it mean to say that "the adolescent can now cognize the thoughts of others" (Elkind, 1967, p. 1029)? If the adolescent *can* conceptualize the thoughts of others, he/she would not be likely to make egocentric attributions. Hence, under this interpretation, the crux of adolescent egocentrism cannot be the adolescent inability "to differentiate between what others are thinking about and his own mental preoccupation" (Elkind, 1967, p. 1029), since the theoretical precondition for this is the ability to cognize the thoughts of others.

However, a second interpretation is possible. When it is said that the adolescent can now cognize the thoughts of others, what is meant by *cognize* is that the adolescent is aware that others have a covert inner life and their own unique perspective. When the adolescent thinks about the other's idiosyncratic perspective, when he/she attempts to cognize the other's thoughts he/she does so inaccurately, attributing to the other his/her own perspective as a result. This is not unlike the description of spatial egocentrism on the Piagetian three-mountains task. According to Piaget and Inhelder (1967), when a child is confronted with this task she/he has intuitive knowledge that what the other sees must be different from what is perceptually given to him/her (see p. 216, 226) but he/she is unable to make the necessary transformations (e.g., multiply coordinate axes) that would allow the assumption of a rotated perspective. When a child is asked to indicate a non-self-perspective, he/she must deduce or "imagine in anticipation" a perception not experienced but referred to by another. Lacking the ability to form a comprehensive mental picture detailed enough to enable her/him to think out the transformations, the child's spatial imagination remains *reproductive*, as opposed to anticipatory, and is thus centered on the perspective corresponding to his/her own position relative to the static array.

The crux of adolescent egocentrism is also analogous to the role-taking failure commonly found on privileged information tasks. The adolescent has privileged information regarding his own covert inner life, his own self-preoccupations. But when he attempts to cognize the thoughts of others, he fails to suppress his privileged information, his own perspective intrudes, with the result that he "reproduces" his own perspective rather than "anticipating" the perspective of the other.

While adolescent egocentrism is clearly analogous to the role-taking failure on spatial and privileged information tasks, the problem is that egocentric responding on these latter tasks is not all characteristic of young formal operators. The failure to differentiate between one's self-preoccupations (e.g., one's visual perspective, one's privileged information) and the thoughts of others, with the resulting attribution to others of one's own mental products, is not characteristic of the role-taking abilities of adolescents. The scientific results here are unambiguously clear (see Selman, 1980; Enright & Lapsley, 1981). Hence there is little reason to expect the type of attribution error anticipated by the crux of adolescent egocentrism in young adolescents. It should be pointed out that the development of social perspective-taking skills was not well understood at the time the adolescent egocentrism construct was first enunciated (Elkind, 1967). Recent developments in *social cognitive development* renders implausible the type of role-taking error attributed to formal operators plagued with adolescent egocentrism.

However, a third interpretation of adolescent egocentrism is still possible. If we ask under what conditions are IA and PF attributions likely to occur, we could answer, in accordance with the theory, that they occur under conditions of self-focused attention. According to Elkind (1967), preoccupation with the self is heightened in early adolescence because of the physiological changes associated with the onset of puberty. One might argue, then, that while young formal operators do indeed have the cognitive *competence* to assume multiple perspectives, the actual *performance* of this skill is attenuated by the self-directed attention which accompanies puberty—making egocentric attribution more likely in the process.

While this interpretation is entirely plausible, it does not square with recent research findings. Stephenson and Wicklund (1983), for example, in a test of the objective self-awareness theory (Wicklund, 1979), found that increased self-focused attention *improves* the role-taking ability of college students. Similarly, in a recently completed study, we have found that self-focused attention substantially improves the role-taking performance of otherwise egocentric youngsters on privileged information tasks (Lapsley, Pryor & Quintana, 1984; Lapsley & Quintana, 1985). Self-focused attention, then, serves to *increase* attunement to another's perspective, and serves to *reduce* the discrepancy between competence and performance.

Hence there appear to be three principal difficulties with the current theoretical framework of adolescent egocentrism. First, the account of the passage out of adolescent egocentrism is theoretically inconsistent with the transition rules established for prior variants of cognitive egocentrism. This suggests that the egocentrism of adolescence is quite different from the egocentrisms of sensorimotor, preoperational, and con-

crete operational thought. Hence, the behavior associated with adolescent egocentrism need to be placed within a different ontogenetic context. Second, the theoretical precondition for the emergence of adolescent egocentrism, the ability to cognize the thoughts of others, actually constitutes grounds for precluding the emergence of egocentrism. Finally, the definition of the *crux* of adolescent egocentrism is rendered implausible in light of recent advances in social cognitive development.

Given these criticisms, can an alternative model be developed to account for imaginary audience (IA) and personal fable (PF) behaviors? We believe that such a model can indeed be developed by placing the IA and PF constructs not in the context of *cognitive* development, but *social* cognitive development. Imaginary audience and personal fable behaviors are essentially problems in interpersonal understanding. There are known developmental sequences which describe the ontogenesis of such understanding (e.g., Selman, 1971, 1980), and these sequences constitute a better theoretical ancestry for understanding the IA and PF constructs than do the egocentrism of Piagetian logical development. More specifically, we argue that adolescent behaviors commonly associated with "adolescent egocentrism" can be better understood by reference to the levels of perspective taking in adolescence as described by Selman. This framework will be seen to satisfy the twin requirements for a satisfactory account of the rise and fall of "adolescent egocentrism," namely, (1) that no appeal be made to a consolidation hypothesis and (2) that the constructs (IA and PF) be placed within the context of the development of interpersonal understanding. To justify this claim, it will prove instructive to describe the perspective-taking levels prior to adolescence. This is done not only to place the IA and PF constructs in a more appropriate ontogenetic context, but it also serves to highlight the inadequacy of the traditional definition of adolescent egocentrism (cf. Elkind, 1967).

LEVELS OF ROLE-TAKING DEVELOPMENT

Selman's approach to interpersonal understanding embraces the assumptions of structural developmentalism. Interpersonal understanding is governed by social role-taking capabilities, capabilities which undergo structural transformations with development and which can be described as a sequence of stages. The following is a brief synopsis of Selman's role-taking sequence.

Level 0. At this stage the young child views the other person egocentrically, or as undifferentiated from the self's point of view. While the child has an intuitive understanding that the other could have a different point of view, he/she lacks the inferential ability to actually discern what that view is. She/he assumes that in similar contexts others would act or

feel as she/he would in that situation. There is also no distinction between inner, psychological experience and outer, physical experience. That is, the child is not aware that psychological experience can exist apart from overt, physical action. Hence the child's conception of self can be described as being "physicalistic."

Level 1. The child at this stage now clearly recognizes the distinction between inner and outer states, and defines the "true" self in terms of subjective inner states. It is also possible for others to have their own subjective inner states, and the child can infer what the thoughts and feelings of others are with great accuracy. The child also realizes that his/her own covert states can be the object of another person's thinking, but he/she cannot accurately evaluate his/her own behavior from the perspective of the other. In other words, he/she cannot view himself/herself from another's perspective. Again, while the child has an intuitive understanding that another can think about the self, he/she lacks the inferential ability to discern what that perspective is. There is thus no reciprocity between the perspectives of self and other.

Level 2. Reciprocity between self-other perspectives is accomplished at this stage. A child can now view himself/herself from the perspective of another, and modify his/her behavior accordingly. That is, as in Level 1, the child realizes that his/her own subjective states are open to the scrutiny of others, but now his/her conception of others is reconstructed to fit the new awareness that others can view the self as a subject (Muuss, 1982). However, role-taking at this level is merely sequential, constrained within a two-person frame of reference.

Level 3. This role-taking stage marks the onset of early adolescence. The role-taking accomplishment at this level is the assumption by the child of a third-party perspective. The young adolescent can step outside the dyadic relation and be simultaneously aware of each other's subjectivity. Thus, the child can see himself/herself as both actor and object. He/she can also assume the perspective of the "average" member of the group, and view self-other interactions from this more generalized perspective. Furthermore, and importantly for our reevaluation of adolescent egocentrism, adolescents can reflect on their own self-observations of the self. This self-awareness of its own self-awareness implies that the young adolescent knows that one can consciously monitor one's own self-experience. This new awareness is thought to explain the increased self-consciousness of young adolescents (Damon & Hart, 1982). It also is thought to explain the heightened sense of personal agency commonly observed in adolescents. This sense of personal agency is the result of the adolescent's conception of the mind as a potential processor and manipulator of experience, which makes the mental powers of self-reflective self-awareness a new mode of self-control. The adolescent gen-

erally believes that one has control over one's thoughts and emotion. Thus, according to Selman (1980, pp. 104–105),

What appears new and striking at Level 3 is a belief in the observing ego—that is, the self-aware self as an active agent. This concept of active agency strikes us as the development in the child's own theory critical for a child's feeling of having some control over his own thoughts and feelings, even if it is not perfect. For the Level 3 child, the mind (or ego) is now seen as playing an active moderating role between inner feelings and outer actions.

We will see that Level 3 perspective taking carries us some distance in our understanding of imaginary audience and personal fable behaviors in adolescence.

Level 4. At this stage the self can take a generalized societal perspective of the self–other interaction. There is a coordination of all possible third-party perspectives. There is also some awareness that certain mental experiences are not available for self-observation, that the self-reflective self-control of Level 3 does not include self-control of certain unconscious processes. Hence, adolescents can compare perspectives at many levels, from that of society, to that of a naive depth psychologist, where adolescents are aware that motivations and thoughts can be shaped by psychological factors that are not available for self-analysis, but which influence behavior nonetheless.

Empirical support for the sequentiality of social perspective taking has been demonstrated for early (Selman, 1971) and middle childhood (Selman & Byrne, 1974). Byrne (1973) extended the validation of the sequence into adolescence and early adulthood. She presented subjects at ages 10, 12, 16, and adult (22–30) with perspective-taking dilemmas and open-ended interviews. She found that perspective taking was significantly correlated with age ($r = .86$). All of the adults in this study were coded at Level 4; 57% of the 16-year-olds were at Level 3 (with 21% at each adjacent Level 2 and 4); 86% of the 13-year-olds were at Levels 2 and 3, while 85% of the 10-year-olds were at Level 2. Selman (1980) reports longitudinal evidence which attests at the invariant progression of subjects from Level 2 to Level 4. For additional evidence on the sequential properties of interpersonal understanding, see Selman (1980).

A NEW LOOK

With this review of perspective-taking levels in mind we can now re-evaluate certain features of the adolescent egocentrism construct. What is most apparent is that adolescents are rather sophisticated at assuming roles and coordinating social perspectives. It does not seem true that in adolescence the child “can *now* (italics added) cognize the thoughts of others” (Elkind, 1967, p. 1029), since even Level 1 children can not only

clearly differentiate the subjectivity of self and other, but can infer with great accuracy the thoughts of the other. Thus, the theoretical grounding of the imaginary audience and the personal fable cannot be plausibly related to the failure in differentiating self–other perspectives, since this feature is characteristic of early-middle childhood.

Yet one must still account for the empirical evidence offered in support of the construct (e.g., Adams & Jones, 1981; Elkind & Bowen, 1979; Enright et al., 1979, 1980). It is not sufficient to simply criticize the theoretical assumptions of a construct which has a degree of empirical support, or even to offer an alternative theoretical framework, as we have done here. One must also attempt to reinterpret the major features of Elkind's theory, in this case the imaginary audience and personal fable components, in light of this alternative theoretical approach. We have noted above that Selman's Level 3 role taking, which coincides with the period of early adolescence, can be profitably employed for this purpose. This stage readily accounts for the heightened sense of self-consciousness observed in early adolescence. It is crucial to point out that the imaginary audience component is inferred in most research studies (e.g., Adams & Jones, 1981) when high levels of self-consciousness are observed. Indeed, Elkind and Bowen's (1979) Imaginary Audience Scale is essentially a measure of self-consciousness. This measure attempts to determine how willing subjects are to reveal both transient and abiding aspects of the self to others. Subjects who are relatively unwilling to reveal themselves to others are presumed to be highly self-conscious in the presence of others. This, in turn, is used to infer the operation of the imaginary audience. But note the asymmetry between theory and assessment. The imaginary audience is purported to be an instantiation of egocentrism, but it is inferred by the presence of self-consciousness. But egocentrism is not self-consciousness. Hence the operationalization of the imaginary audience (via the IAS) tells us much about the level of self-consciousness in young adolescents, but very little about egocentric attributions. And, in fact, as we have argued earlier, one can dispense with the concept of egocentrism altogether, since it plays no meaningful explanatory role. If the crux of the imaginary audience construct is self-consciousness, the presence of self-consciousness can be more directly and forthrightly related to the "observing ego," the self-reflective, self-awareness characteristic of Level 3 perspective taking. Hence, the heightened self-consciousness commonly observed in young adolescents is the natural outcome of the emergence of Level 3 perspective-taking skills (Damon & Hart, 1982). This is, in fact, a more parsimonious account of the imaginary audience, one which requires no reference to "egocentrism."

A more promising way of conceptualizing the imaginary audience construct is to view it as the anticipation of the reactions of others to oneself

in imaginative situations, such as the reaction to one's own demise (e.g., Elkind, 1967, p. 1031). Adolescents are quite capable of thinking about themselves and the reactions of others in hypothetical situations, no matter how fantastic or fanciful the situation. This is, in fact, the approach taken by Enright and his colleagues (Enright et al., 1979, 1980) in their operationalization of the imaginary audience. Rather than ask subjects to indicate their willingness to reveal aspects of themselves to others, which is the approach adopted by Elkind and Bowen (1979), they asked subjects to rate the importance of imagining the reactions of others to themselves in imaginative situations. For example, their imaginary audience subscale includes items such as "Being able to daydream about great successes and thinking of other people's reactions," and "Being able to think about having a lot of money someday and how people will admire that." Note that these fanciful constructions by the adolescent are quite different from Elkind's definition of adolescent egocentrism, where the child attributes her own perspective to others. No egocentrism is implicated in the Enright et al. items, only the workings of an overactive imagination. This we believe to be the essence of the imaginary audience. While such imaginative thinking would seem to require the formal operational ability to think hypothetically, formal operations would not be sufficient to explain imaginary audience constructions. The relation between levels of *cognitive* development (e.g., formal operations) and *social* cognitive development (e.g., moral judgment, role taking) is generally thought to be one of necessity, but not sufficiency. Logical thought concerns operations on objects, while role taking involves the further understanding that people are objects *with* subjectivity (Walker, 1980). Hence, while there seems to be a viable construct that can be best described as "imaginary audience," this construct (as operationalized by Enright et al.) does not involve egocentrism, and it may not implicate self-consciousness to as large a degree as envisioned by Elkind and Bowen (1979). To the extent that self-consciousness is an important concomitant of the imaginary audience, it is best thought of as a result of Level 3 role taking. While the ability to think hypothetically may be a necessary component of imaginary audience thinking, it is not in itself a sufficient explanation without a concomitant consideration of Level 3 role taking, where the adolescent can step outside of the dyadic relation and reflect (hypothetically) on the self-other interaction. To put it differently, even though an adolescent may be able to think hypothetically, and this through the offices of formal operations, imaginary audience cognition should not be possible unless the child is also at Level 3 role taking. Thus, we believe that this level of reasoning regarding interpersonal understanding is crucial to understanding the imaginary audience construct.

In sum, imaginary audience constructions emerge from the wedding of

two emergent social-cognitive skills, the ability to think hypothetically (formal operations) and the ability to mentally step outside dyadic relations and reflect on self-other interactions (Level 3 perspective taking). Taking the products of the latter and casting them into hypothetical contexts results in imaginary audience constructions. Heightened self-consciousness is the outcome of the "observing ego" of Level 3 perspective taking. No egocentrism is implied by this process.

Can the personal fable be related to levels of role taking in adolescence? According to Elkind (1967), the personal fable engenders feeling of personal uniqueness and indestructibility. However, the theoretical link between the emergence of this component and formal operations or cognitive egocentrism is tenuous or nonexistent. There is little about formal operations that would lead us to expect constructions of the personal fable. On the other hand, Stage 3 role taking seems to provide such a theoretical link. As noted above, the adolescent at this level is aware of his own self-awareness, is cognizant of the power of self-reflection. The mental powers of self-reflective self-awareness provides a new mode of self-control. The mind is now conceived to be an active manipulator of experience. This development in perspective taking can perhaps be utilized to account for the personal fable construct. It is plausible to presume, for example, that feelings of personal uniqueness would be forthcoming from one's self-reflective self-awareness. According to Wicklund's (1979) objective self-awareness theory, self-focused attention operates on a Gestalt principle. It serves to set off the self as *figure* from the *background* of other perspectives and relations. Hence, analysis of one's own "observing ego" would be likely to increase self-preoccupation and highlight elements of individuality. It would also highlight the power of self-reflection, which is reflected in the tendency toward idealism in adolescence. The adolescent does not understand why the rest of the world does not accept the products of his own self-reflection, his idealistic solutions to social or ideological problems (Elkind, 1968). Thus, the self-reflective awareness of Level 3 role taking permits the adolescent to monitor his own introspective states. This, in turn, permits an (exaggerated) understanding of his own individuality, and a self-impressed understanding of the power of his own mental construction, which is reflected in adolescent idealism.

The increased sense of personal agency which accompanies self-reflective self-awareness may also account for the sense of indestructibility, which is said to be characteristic of the personal fable. The increased self-consciousness of adolescents, who now conceive of the mind as an active processor and manipulator of experience, may now see the power of self-reflection as the capacity or condition for exerting power in other circumstances (e.g., "death, pregnancy, accidents . . . will never happen

to *me*''). Hence, we argue that both features of the personal fable, the sense of personal uniqueness and of indestructibility, can be accounted for by reference to Level 3 role taking in adolescence.

We have yet to comment on the diminution of the imaginary audience and the personal fable. Elkind (1967) suggests that the decline of these cognitive styles is related to role-taking experiences in later adolescence. We agree. But in the present framework an appeal to the more accurate social understanding that results from such experiences is consistent with the ontogenetic context that we have developed for the imaginary audience and personal fable. We have argued that IA and PF constructions are largely the outcome of Level 3 perspective taking, a level that has an interpersonal–developmental history. It is a phase in the development of interpersonal understanding. Furthermore, the availability of another stage in that sequence (Level 4) suggests an explanation for the decline of imaginary audience and personal fable constructions. At the fourth level of interpersonal understanding the young adult can coordinate all possible third-party perspectives and can assume a societal-systems perspective. This, in turn, obviates the need to hypothetically imagine the reaction of others to the self in fanciful situations, since the adolescent can now confidently place himself in the larger matrix of social perspectives; he can coordinate the observing egos of others (and not only his own) and in the process attune his social cognitions more in line with reality, precluding the necessity for hypothetical constructions.

Level 4 perspective taking also allows the adolescent an awareness that his ego has little control over unconscious processes. It thus highlights for the adolescent the limits of self-reflective self-control. The observing ego is powerless to control all aspects of his thoughts. This in turn diminishes the notion of agency. If the ego cannot assert itself in all facets of personal cognition, it is unlikely that the self can assert itself in other situations as well (e.g., “accidents, death, pregnancy *can* happen to me”). Because the adolescent can now coordinate all possible third-party perspectives, the adolescent can realize the power and limitations of the observing ego of others, thereby decreasing one’s sense of personal uniqueness. The self is no longer isolated as *figure* from the *ground* of other perspectives. Rather, with the ability to coordinate all possible third-party perspectives, and with the emergence of a systems perspective, there is not only an awareness of multiple *figures*, but also an awareness that the self can be located within the *ground* of other perspectives, respectively.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

There are two principle advantages for reconceptualizing the imaginary audience and personal fable constructs along the lines suggested in this

article. First, it places these constructs in a more theoretically consistent ontogenetic context, namely, the stage sequence describing social perspective-taking development. As such it emphasizes the fact that adolescent constructions of imaginary audiences and personal fables are problems of interpersonal understanding and that reference to cognitive and logical egocentrism fails to capture the social basis of these cognitions.

The model proposed here also better accounts for the transition out of "adolescent egocentrism." It is passed by the onset of the next perspective-taking stage in late adolescence, where there is coordination of all possible third-party perspectives (which minimizes the imaginary audience phenomena) and also an in-depth understanding of the limits of self-reflection (which, in turn, attenuates the personal fable). The IA and PF can be powerful tools for understanding typical adolescent behaviors. These constructs may also provide insights for designing developmental interventions. What is first required, however, is some measure of conceptual clarity. We hope that the present model provides sufficient clarity to suggest new lines of research and new efforts at designing developmental programs for prevention and intervention.

The model proposed here does not, however, exhaust the range of alternative explanations for the adolescent egocentrism construct. We have argued that the IA and PF constructs are outcomes of social cognitive development and that they can be placed in context by reference to the ontogenesis of interpersonal understanding. It is also possible, however, that IA and PF constructions are not causally connected end products or outcomes at all, but are rather ideations that follow their own developmental course, a course that is simply correlated with levels of interpersonal understanding. Just as children are capable of varying levels of self-reflection and interpersonal understanding, so, too, may young children invoke differing levels of imaginary audiences and personal fables throughout the course of social cognitive development.

One might also argue that adolescents advance their own development to new levels of sophistication precisely because they care so much about how they look and how they are felt about. Thus, rather than IA and PF constructions diminishing as a *result* of the onset of Level 4 perspective taking, we can turn things around. We can argue that the acquisition of Level 4 is *motivated* by IA and PF constructions, because, for example, these ideations motivate social comparison and social engagement.

These are not implausible conjectures, though we must add that both alternative views lack firm theoretical grounding. For example, there is as yet no theoretical framework that would lead us to expect an independent developmental course for IA and PF. There is no available theory from which we can devolve the form that these constructions may take in early and middle childhood. Such a theory would need to explain why

these earlier accounts of IA and PF should not be considered aspects of interpersonal understanding and hence accountable in terms of the general knowledge structure that organizes such understanding (e.g., Selman, 1980). In order for the second conjecture to work, we would need to posit a *causal* theory that explained not only how Level 4 is attained through IA and PF constructions, but also how prior perspective-taking levels are attained through developmentally prior IA and PF ideations. In the absence of such a theoretical framework there is little reason to prefer these alternative views.

In conclusion, we reiterate our view that the present model is to be preferred because it acknowledges that IA and PF constructions are essentially problems in interpersonal understanding; that such understanding is organized by general knowledge structures that display lawful developmental change; and that the IA and PF constructions are better placed in theoretical context with reference to this pattern of development.

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