

Elkind on Egocentrism

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The purpose of this paper is to respond to D. Elkind's (1985, *Developmental Review*, 5, 218-226) reply to D. Lapsley and M. Murphy's (1985, *Developmental Review*, 5, 201-217) critique of the adolescent egocentrism theory. After a reprise of the issues in contention, we address the problem of theoretical consistency and self-other differentiation in Dr. Elkind's (1967, *Child Development*, 38, 1025-1034) theory. The role of formal operations in the Lapsley and Murphy (1985) account of the imaginary audience and personal fable is revised, and the empirical support for Elkind's theory is reviewed. We conclude that there are good conceptual and empirical grounds for doubting the major assumptions of the adolescent egocentrism theory, and that the Lapsley and Murphy (1985) framework has promise in suggesting theoretical integration with other approaches to the self. © 1985 Academic Press, Inc.

A REPRISE OF TWO THEMES

According to Inhelder and Piaget (1958) the emergence of adolescent personality characteristics is intimately linked to formal operational structures. In particular, the ability to subordinate the real to the possible, and the capacity for self-reflective thought, as the signal accomplishments of formal operations, are said to underlie the adolescent penchant for criticizing adult institutions, for their idealism, romanticism, and intellectualization, and for their orientation toward ideology and future life plans (Blasi & Hoeffel, 1974). Elkind's (1967) theory of adolescent egocentrism is a variant of this "cognitive developmental hypothesis of adolescence" (Blasi & Hoeffel, 1974, p. 348; see Chandler, 1975, for another example). As with any emergent structure-in-creation, Elkind (1967, 1985) sees the onset of formal operations as involving a type of differentiation failure with respect to second-order operations. In the original paper this differentiation failure was described in the following manner:

[F]ormal operational thought not only enables the adolescent to conceptualize his thoughts, it also permits him to conceptualize the thought of other people. It is this capacity to take account of other people's thought, however, which is the crux of adolescent egocentrism. This egocentrism emerges because, while the adolescent can now cognize the thoughts of others, he fails to differentiate between the

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objects toward which the thoughts of others are directed and those which are the focus of his own concern. (Elkind, 1967, p. 1029)

This differentiation failure, or egocentrism, contributes to the adolescent belief that he or she is the object of others' attention (imaginary audience) and that, since this is the case, he or she must be special and unique and therefore deserving of such attention (personal fable).

The imaginary audience (IA) and personal fable (PF) constructs seem to account for a variety of behaviors commonly attributed to adolescents. Self-consciousness, show-off behavior, and the morbid preoccupation with shame and embarrassment, all seem to reflect the imaginary audience component of the theory. The sense of personal agency, idealism, and indestructibility can be attributed to the adolescent's construction of a personal fable. The tendency to make these attribution errors is said to diminish in late adolescence, according to Elkind (1967), with the consolidation of formal operations, and through intimacy and role experimentation, which provide the mechanisms for more accurate social understanding.

While not disputing the heuristic power of the imaginary audience and personal fable constructs, Lapsley and Murphy (1985) argue that they are not well placed in the theoretical context that Elkind (1967) provides for them. We argued that the account of the passage out of adolescent egocentrism (e.g., the consolidation hypothesis) is inconsistent with the transition rules established for prior variants of cognitive egocentrism. In addition, interpersonal experiences seem to play a decisive role in cognitive development, in Elkind's (1967) account, only in late adolescence. However, as we put it in our critique, "Interpersonal understanding must not be introduced as a theoretical *deus ex machina* in order to account for transition" (Lapsley & Murphy, 1985, p. 205). We were also critical of Elkind's (1967) account of the "crux" of adolescent egocentrism, and with the asymmetry between theory and research regarding the assessment of the construct.

On the positive side we attempted to provide an alternative conceptual framework for the imaginary audience and personal fable constructs. In our view these constructs represent problems in interpersonal understanding, and, as such, an account of the ontogenesis of such understanding constitutes (in our view) a better theoretical ancestry for understanding the IA and PF constructs than do the egocentrism of Piagetian logical development. We found Selman's (1980) important work on the development of interpersonal understanding to be useful in this regard. In particular, we felt that Level 3 in the sequence can meaningfully account for the principal features of the imaginary audience and personal fable. Furthermore, the emergence of Level 4 in the sequence can account

for the diminution of these ideations in late adolescence. We attempted to show how this alternative framework satisfied two requirements for a satisfactory account of the rise and fall of "adolescent egocentrism," namely, that no appeal be made to a consolidation hypothesis and that the IA and PF constructs be placed within the ontogenetic context of *social* cognitive development.

With this reprise of the major issues in mind I would now like to selectively respond to Elkind's (1985) commentary on our critique (Lapsley & Murphy, 1985). Elkind's (1985) reply provides the grist not only for pressing our claims against the adolescent egocentrism theory, but it also permits me the opportunity to clarify, and in one instance, revise, our own position. As will be seen, however, this revision is not to the advantage of Elkind's (1967) theory as presently formulated.

ON THEORETICAL CONSISTENCY

Elkind (1985) acknowledges our point that the account of the diminution of adolescent egocentrism is theoretically inconsistent with the transition rules established for prior variants of cognitive egocentrism. But Elkind (1985) defends this theoretical inconsistency by stating that growth and development are also inconsistent. He writes,

Children grow and then stop growing, intelligence-peaks and then declines with age, as does physical vigor. Nature itself is inconsistent as even the physicists have discovered. The wave and particle theories of light are inconsistent but both work and both are necessary. A theory which is self-consistent but which does not deal with the phenomena it seeks to explain demonstrates a rather worthless consistency. (Elkind, 1985, p 221)

Elkind (1985) seems to be arguing that we need theoretically inconsistent accounts of developmental processes because the phenomenon that we are attempting to explain is also inconsistent. But surely we can admit that growth and development often show puzzling and quixotic patterns of change, without concluding that therefore we require quixotic theories to account for this change. What we *can* conclude is that we must develop entirely self-consistent theories that are powerful enough to deduce difficult patterns of change as a consequence. Now when we argued that the adolescent egocentrism theory was theoretically inconsistent, what we meant by "inconsistent" was that the premises of the theory were internally at odds with one another, and that, as a consequence, the very structure of the theory rendered it an incoherent and unsatisfactory account of a developmental process in adolescence. But notice that Elkind (1985) is arguing a different matter altogether. He is making a point about the (allegedly necessary) inconsistency reflected in the fact that two rival theories can account for the same data, and that somehow this state of affairs justifies the phrasing of internally inconsistent theories. Apart from

the logical problems involved in this line of reasoning, there is nothing at all inconsistent about rival theories accounting for the same evidence. Theories are undetermined by data. Indeed, theory testing rarely yields unequivocal results. This is so because it is never a theory, in isolation, that is put to the test, or that is confronted with Nature. Rather, it is a theory, plus a host of (sometimes inarticulated) auxiliary assumptions (that are provisionally considered "unproblematic background knowledge") and a *ceteris paribus* clause (that says that no unintended perturbing influence is affecting an experimental outcome) that is concomitantly and jointly put to the test. Should a theory fail an empirical test, the "refutation" can always be ameliorated by an appeal to *ceteris paribus*, or by suspecting an auxiliary assumption. But there is nothing inconsistent or irrational about this (Serlin & Lapsley, 1985). Again, the wave and particle theories of light are entirely self-consistent theories that provide rival interpretation of light, and the adequacy of either theory can be sustained across a range of potential empirical failure by *ceteris paribus* and background assumptions. In this light both theories "work," but there is nothing at all inconsistent about this, and there is nothing in this process that speaks to the issue of theoretical inconsistency in the sense that we intended in our critique of Elkind's (1967) theory.

Elkind (1985) attempts to evade our criticism by appealing to *décalage* in the acquisition of conservation concepts, and the nonuniversality of some formal abilities, as if these were evidence for the necessity of theoretical inconsistency. But is evidence for *décalage* an inconsistency for cognitive developmental theory? Only if researchers refuse to admit auxiliary hypotheses into the corpus of the theory that would allow *décalage* to be deduced as a consequence (e.g., Levine, 1979). Indeed, Broughton (1981, p. 197) notes that "The dyschronisms or asynchronies are not signs of disorganization, but they themselves form a regular and predictable series, and, therefore, in no way present a threat to Piaget's structural system." Is it theoretically inconsistent that some formal abilities are not universally acquired? Not at all, since Piaget's theory postulates the universality of the sequence, and not that everyone must reach the final stage. Hence there appears to be little justification for regarding the inconsistency that is evident in the internal structure of the adolescent egocentrism theory as anything other than the theoretical oddity that it is. By appealing to Selman's (1980) theory of interpersonal understanding we attempted to provide a theoretically consistent ontogenetic context for understanding the rise and fall of the imaginary audience and personal fable constructs.

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. (Lapsley & Murphy, 1985, p 205).

This is precisely what Elkind's (1967) theory fails to do. Elkind (1985) is perfectly correct when he notes that a self-consistent theory that fails to account for the phenomena that it seeks to explain "demonstrates a rather worthless consistency." But it is worthless not because it is self-consistent, but because it fails to account for empirical realities. So what is required for scientific progress is the proliferation of self-consistent theories that also digests anomalies and withstands attempts at falsification. We argue that Elkind's (1967) theory fails on the first count regarding internal consistency (Lapsley & Murphy, 1985). I will have occasion to note how well the theory has fared on strictly empirical grounds.

ON SELF-OTHER DIFFERENTIATION

In his rejoinder Elkind (1985) has clarified the nature of the differentiation failure that is said to accompany the onset of formal operations. "The main point about the imaginary audience," he writes, "is the fact that it is imaginary, not real . . . The young teenager has trouble in differentiating between the concerns of others he or she has created and concerns which are properly his or her own" (Elkind, 1985, p 222). Elkind (1985) has also provided a helpful example, a teenager who stands in front of a mirror, combing his or her hair, and imagining how admiring the peer group will be.

In our paper we criticized Elkind's (1967) account of the differentiation failure, or egocentrism, that is promoted by the onset of formal operations, on the grounds that it simultaneously assumes that perspective taking is, and is not, possible (Lapsley & Murphy, 1985). In the original paper, in the key passage (cited above) that describes the "crux" of adolescent egocentrism, Elkind (1967, p. 1029) implies that perspective taking, which is now permitted by formal operations, is an important mechanism for understanding the imaginary audience. This is suggested by such phrases as (1) "permits him to conceptualize the thought of other people," (2) "the capacity to take account of other people's thought," and (3) "the adolescent can now cognize the thoughts of others." But apparently, according to Elkind (1985), none of this is necessary. The adolescent need not conceptualize, take account of, or cognize the thoughts of others at all. So the differentiation failure associated with adolescent egocentrism is apparently not a result of undifferentiated perspective taking. Instead, all that is required is that the adolescent imagine the reaction of hypothetically created others to the self, in imaginative situations. This is related to formal operations, according to Elkind (1985), because the imaginary audience is a mental construction, a

second-order operation. This is similar to the formulation that we advanced in Lapsley and Murphy (1985). We argued that the imaginary audience involves the anticipation of the reactions of others to the self in imaginative situations. We further suggested that 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 monitor self-other interactions (Level 3 perspective taking). "Taking the products of the latter and casting them into hypothetical contexts results in imaginary audience constructions" (Lapsley & Murphy, 1985). But no differentiation failure is implicated in this process.

In retrospect, however, I wonder if we gave too much credit to the role of formal operations. Blasi and Hoeffel (1974, p. 351), for example, point out "that concrete operational thinking may be perfectly adequate in order to function as a typical Western adolescent, namely, in order to think 'hypothetically' about the future, to organize a plan, and even to compare ideologies, choose one, and to become politically and socially committed." Reducing the role of formal thought in our account of the imaginary audience (and personal fable) would not be critical since our focus is not on formal operations but on the skills provided by Level 3 in Selman's (1980) sequence of interpersonal understanding. But reducing the role of formal thought in Elkind's (1967) theory would seriously undermine the rationale for positing a differentiation failure as the crux of imaginary audience ideation. He writes, "And if it turns out that adolescent egocentrism is not related to the emergence of formal operational thinking, a change in conceptualization will be called for." (Elkind, 1985, p. 225). Apart from Blasi and Hoeffel's (1974) conceptual assault on the "cognitive developmental hypothesis of adolescence," recent empirical findings call into question the relation between formal operations and adolescent egocentrism. Gray and Hudson (1984; also Goossens, 1984), for example, found that imaginary audience scores were highest in subjects who had been classified as concrete operational. Riley, Adams, and Nielsen (1984) found similarly that the onset of formal operational thought actually diminished self-consciousness as assessed by the Imaginary Audience Scale. Finally, in a recently completed study, using an alternative measure of adolescent egocentrism developed by Enright and his colleagues (Enright, Lapsley, & Shukla, 1979; Enright, Shukla, & Lapsley, 1980), we also found no relation between adolescent egocentrism and formal operations (Lapsley, 1985). Hence, while the evidence is surely not all in, there are nevertheless good (conceptual and empirical) grounds for doubting the major theoretical assumptions of adolescent egocentrism. It would be prudent to begin looking for an alternative theoretical framework.

MISCELLANY AND SPECULATIONS

In this final section I would like to respond briefly to a number of relatively minor points raised by Elkind (1985) and to conclude with some reflections on the future direction of research in this area. First, we readily acknowledge Elkind's important efforts in "heating up" the cold cognition of Piagetian cognitive development. The adolescent egocentrism theory has been a staple in virtually every textbook on child and adolescent development for at least a decade. This is no doubt due to the fact that the theory yields a genuinely interesting account of adolescent behavior. Elkind's (1967) attempt to derive clinical and social implications from Piagetian theory has had a salutary influence on the field, and in no way did we wish to minimize this important contribution.

But having said this I see no reason to withdraw the charge that the ontogenetic context of adolescent egocentrism up to late adolescence focuses on impersonal cognition, and that the theory warms up to consider decidedly interpersonal experiences only in late adolescence. I see no reason to be wedded to this inconsistency, and every reason to believe that social experiences play an important role in all phases of development.

Elkind (1985) accuses us of ignoring the prehistory of social cognition and of reducing the scope of social cognition to perspective taking. We ignored the prehistory of social cognition because it is simply not relevant to the issue at hand, and we do not believe that socialization, or social cognition, can be reduced to perspective taking. Our intent was to render an account of the imaginary audience and personal fable constructs in terms of the ontogenesis of the interpersonal understanding, and we felt that Selman's (1980) account of this development was a good place to start.

In the course of his rejoinder, Elkind (1985) (1) impugns the study of perspective taking because it was pioneered by Piaget's investigations of spatial perspective taking on the classic three-mountains task, (2) implies that Selman's (1980) assessment of role taking and interpersonal understanding is heavily influenced by situational cues, and (3) raises questions about the origins of the "observing ego" and the relation between self-awareness and self-consciousness.

The first point is no doubt related to the charge that we ignored the prehistory of social cognition. Elkind (1985) seems to argue that if we had but noted that the study of perspective taking had originated with Piaget's analysis of the three-mountains task, which is a measure of spatial perspective taking, then we would not have made the apparent error of appealing to the ontogenesis of perspective taking in order to help us understand the onset and decline of the IA and PF constructs. But this

line of reasoning seems to succumb to the genetic fallacy. There is a rich and varied literature on social perspective taking, much of it in the structural developmental tradition, that has nothing to do with inferring lines of sight, "but with an inquiry into attitudes, feelings, and beliefs" (Chandler, 1977, p. 111). So there is little reason to question the domain of social role taking on the basis of Piaget's initial investigations.

Is it true that Selman's assessment of role taking is imbued with situational cues? One need only consult the scoring manual to see that this charge is groundless (e.g., Selman, 1979, 1980). In the puppy story, for example, asking subjects to decide what the character in the story should do is only a minor aspect of the assessment. It serves only as a point of departure for determining the child's understanding of subjectivity, self-reflection, conceptions of personality, and personality change. The amount of interpersonal reflection that this clinical interrogation requires of the child is hardly "low level."

The "observing ego" is a suggestive term coined by Selman (1980) to describe the young adolescent's ability to self-reflectively monitor self-other interactions. The ability to assume this perspective emerges in Level 3 of the perspective-tasking sequence. The adolescent can also reflect on his or her behavior from the perspective of the "generalized other." These twin features of Level 3 perspective taking readily account for the imaginary audience. The self-reflective monitoring of the self in ongoing interactions means that the adolescent plays to the audience of the ego (the "observing ego"), and he or she can also play to the audience of, say, the peer group (the "generalized other"). This self-monitoring of the self contributes to the heightened self-consciousness of early adolescence. I regard the attempt to account for adolescent self-consciousness in terms of the "observing ego" properties of Level 3 perspective taking to be richly suggestive, and plausible, but not the attempt to account for it in terms of a differentiation failure. As to the distinction between self-consciousness and self-awareness, I am not prepared to render one, though I doubt whether much depends on making the distinction anyway.

In conclusion let me reiterate our view that the present reformulation of the adolescent egocentrism theory in terms of the ontogenesis of interpersonal understanding is to be preferred because it provides a theoretically consistent account of the imaginary audience and personal fable constructs. But, as Elkind (1985) correctly points out, a theory must also be evaluated in light of its generative power. The ability of the Lapsley and Murphy (1985) reformulated theory to generate novel predictions and to anticipate important theoretical integrations should not, however, be prejudged. We have speculated elsewhere (Lapsley & Quintana, 1985) that this reformulation can perhaps be deployed to give a developmental grounding to certain features of the self-system that are described by the

objective self-awareness (Wicklund, 1979) and the “totalitarian ego” (Greenwald, 1980) theories of social psychology. This may also be the case for the self-monitoring phenomena identified by Snyder (1979; Snyder & Cantor, 1980). In addition, interpersonal understanding, and the emergence of Level 3 perspective-taking abilities, may be at the heart of ego development in early adolescence, so that the imaginary audience and personal fable ideations can be seen as an integral part of the ego developmental process of separation–individuation (e.g., Josselson, 1980, p. 207). While these suggestions are necessarily vague at this point, it is hoped that the alternative account of the adolescent egocentrism theory favored by Lapsley and Murphy (1985) will prove to be a rich source of integrative hypotheses for researchers interested in adolescent development.

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RECEIVED: April 22, 1985.