

Babies are influenced by the beliefs of people around them

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Credit: CEU/Daniel Vogel

Young infants' search for potential hidden objects is influenced by how many objects another person believes to be hidden, according to a new study by researchers Agnes Melinda Kovacs at Central European

University (CEU) and Dora Kampis at the University of Copenhagen (KU), published at the end of 2021 in the journal *Open Mind: Discoveries in Cognitive Science*.

Imagine you are at work and put keys in your bag, and then later you need them again. If you are very convinced they are in your bag, you will continue to search there even if you happen not to find it right away. If however, you think maybe you left them in the kitchen, you may stop searching in the bag sooner. Now imagine that your colleague, seeing your despair, tells you that she thinks the keys are likely in your bag. Even if she did not see what happened, you might double-check again in the bag. This is because interestingly, our behavior is influenced by what others say or believe, even when these should be given little or no weight, because as in this case, we have reliable first-person memory of a situation while the other is clearly ignorant.

The researchers think such effects can be explained by the ultrasocial nature of humans, which makes us especially attentive to others and spontaneously taking into account their mental states (goals, knowledge, beliefs), even when we should not do so. "But what would [infants](#) do? Would the origins of this ultrasociality be found early on?"—asks Kampis, researcher at the University of Copenhagen to describe the key question of the study that was part of her research as a Ph.D. student at CEU.

Kovacs and Kampis hypothesized that for young infants, other people's beliefs may carry high importance, and may therefore be more readily influenced in their own behavior than by another person's seemingly irrelevant belief. In the above example, this would mean searching longer for potentially hidden objects in a location where based on infants' own knowledge there is nothing left, but based on another person's belief there is still something left to search for.

To test this question, the researchers developed a task where infants were presented with an opaque box and saw some objects hidden there. As a next step, infants saw all objects being taken out. Earlier studies suggest that infants search less in such situations, compared to when one object remained in the box (but unbeknownst to them was hidden in a secret compartment). Importantly, in this new study there was also another person present, who saw almost everything infants did, but did not see the last object removed. Then, infants were allowed to search in the box. While infants could know the box was empty, this other person believed that one object remained.

The novel findings of this study was that infants continued to [search](#) if the other person believed one object remained, despite the person not saying anything, her [belief](#) being seemingly irrelevant, and infants still believing the box was empty.

According to the researchers, these counterintuitive results reflect an important feature of human cognition that may be particularly strong in infancy. To learn important knowledge about the world, it is beneficial to rely on other people's knowledge and perspectives. In very young infants, this reliance on others' perspective may be so strong that it leads to such interesting "mistakes." Overall, however, this strong sensitivity to their social world may play a crucial role in how infants become knowledgeable members of their cultural environment.

More information: Dora Kampis et al, Seeing the World From Others' Perspective: 14-Month-Olds Show Altercentric Modulation Effects by Others' Beliefs, *Open Mind* (2022). [DOI: 10.1162/opmi_a_00050](https://doi.org/10.1162/opmi_a_00050)

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