

**BOOK REVIEW**

# What makes us human: How minds develop through social interactions. By Jeremy Carpendale & Charlie Lewis. New York, NY: Routledge, 2021. Paperback USD 22.95, ISBN 9780367537937

In *What makes us human: How minds develop through social interactions*, Carpendale and Lewis (2021) detail the reasoning behind and the relevance of a simultaneously socio-cultural, relational, action-based, and constructivist perspective on human development. In doing so, they also differentiate this framework from accounts it has sometimes been (un)intentionally confused with, such as behaviourism or social learning theory. They also explicate the foundational differences between their framework and other accounts, which have an intuitive appeal and contemporary claim such as nativism. In that spirit, it may be fitting to state what this book is not about before explaining what it is. *What makes us human* is not a list of expected developmental milestones. It is not an anthropocentric listing of marvels human offspring are thought to exhibit that are argued to answer questions about what separates us from other species. Rather, with this book, Carpendale and Lewis aim to detail a truly developmental picture of the infant's journey into becoming 'human'.

The book is based on the premise that children develop within a developmental system. This system or developmental niche is shaped by children's evolutionary heritage, their biology, and the social world. The social world – aptly termed the 'social cradle' into which children are born – is populated by con-specifics that aid them in their quest to enter into a 'community of minds'. According to this framework, a critical feature of the human mind is that it is self-aware, self-reflective, capable of symbolic thought, and of creating belief systems. In essence, the developing mind reaches its human potential by acquiring its cultural inheritance, that is, acquiring the ability to use language to communicate and reason. In contrast to nativist accounts, the human mind is not just 'what the brain does' (Pinker, 1997, p. 21), or an unfolding of a complex biological inheritance that blooms in response to outside stimuli of which some are incidentally social. Instead, it emerges within the reciprocal relationships between developing infants and their social environments that, from the moment of birth, treat the human infant as 'someone rather than something' (Spaemann, 2006).

In this view, the child is an active meaning maker, where meaning is conceptualized not as content (e.g., description, definition) but as a process or a function. Accordingly, meaning is built through the infants' interaction and experiential relations. Meaning is constructed and co-constructed in social contexts in interaction with other agents who willingly and flexibly adjust their thinking to understand and respond to the child's gestures, actions, or words and strive to be understood by the child. This process underlies children's developing abilities to engage in reasoning about others' minds, the process of language acquisition, and moral reasoning.

This book pays homage to scholars such as Elizabeth Bates, James Mark Baldwin, George Herbert Mead, Jean Piaget, and Ludwig Wittgenstein, whose thinking has contributed to this action-based socio-cultural constructivist framework's coherence. Work from scholars who support nativist accounts has also been incorporated into the narrative (e.g., Steven Pinker). However, the reader who is curious to understand the nuances between Carpendale and Lewis's perspective and other scholars of similar socio-cultural, constructivist orientations will have to make do with a short discussion of Michael

Tomasello's work. Contemporaries such as Katherine Nelson, Barbara Rogoff, and theoretical inspirations, notably Vygotsky, have very limited or no coverage. As a consequence, the book appears as if it were primarily designed to convert the sceptic. However, individuals who already subscribe to this view of human development are left wondering how other notable psychologists of socio-cultural orientation fit into this account.

Carpendale and Lewis tackle two intellectual challenges that many avoid in their writing. The first is their insistence on questioning our assumptions about human development with emphasis on the roots and implications of such assumptions. The second is their pronounced efforts to define constructs. Terms such as 'representation', 'innate', or 'meaning', that forced many to take a strategically vague stance are defined with clarity. Remarkably, both their discussions of foundational assumptions and of tricky definitions are presented in an exceptionally accessible manner to anyone interested in thinking about the developmental story of how we become human, regardless of expertise or background. Indeed, whether it is complicated philosophical ideas, psychological theories, advancements in genetics, or techniques and findings from neuroscience, the authors present all of these at an unwavering level of accessibility.

The linguistic style of the book parallels the authors' theoretical framework. Just as they view the human mind as emergent within social interaction, they develop their ideas in a conversational manner, asking and answering questions as they naturally emerge, providing relatable anecdotes. Their writing is clear and free of jargon. References are left to the footnote sections at the end of each chapter, allowing the reader to decide when to focus on details of the arguments. At the end of each chapter, they also provide suggested readings that could provide a starting point for the interested reader to explore these ideas further. We believe that this book would be an excellent introduction to these issues at the advanced undergraduate level and, if supplemented with empirical resources, could constitute the backbone of a graduate seminar.

Finally, a note of caution is warranted. Due to its conversational style and accessible language, this book may appear simple to readers who feel they have only accessed what cutting-edge science offers if they get lost in jargon, details of analyses, and a storm of findings. On the contrary, similar to Bruner's seminal 'Acts of Meaning', which also appears deceptively simple, this book packs an intellectual punch. The thoughtful reader would appreciate that it is not the ideas or the information presented that are simple, but that the authors have done a commendable job at refraining from engaging in esoteric monologue. Staying true to Mead's teachings, Carpendale and Lewis make an honest attempt at laying the groundwork for readers to engage in a meaning-making activity with the authors. In this vein, this book can best be thought of as a 'social act'.

Hande Ilgaz  
Elif Bürümlü Kısa  
Setenay Evsen

*Bilkent University, Ankara, Turkey*  
*Email: hande.ilgaz@bilkent.edu.tr*

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