

# When 9-month-olds go ‘wow’ and ‘yuk’: Understanding other people’s desires

**Claudia Uller**

The Institute of Cognitive Science  
The University of Louisiana at Lafayette  
uller@louisiana.edu

## **Abstract**

Young children perform well on a wide range of tasks involving the attribution of goals/desires. For instance, two- and three-year old children are told that a boy wants to find his rabbit, which is in one of two locations. If the puppet fails to find the rabbit in the first location, children predict that he will look in the second location; if the puppet finds the rabbit in the first location, however, children predict that he will not look in the second location (Wellman and Woolley 1990).

Although there is plenty of evidence that children can reason about other people’s desires, the origins of this ability is still very much unknown. In one study, Repacholi and Gopnik (1997) studied 18-month old children in a food-request procedure in which they asked whether the children could correctly understand people’s desires by predicting specific reactions to desired/undesired objects. The children saw the experimenter express disgust as she tasted one kind of food, and happiness as she tasted a different kind of food. They were then asked to give the experimenter some food. The children correctly gave her the food towards which she had expressed positive affect. This led researchers to conclude that the children not only inferred that another person held a desire, but they also recognized how desires relate to emotions.

More recently, researchers have looked at the origins of other people’s mental states in even younger infants using

visual attention measures. For instance, Woodward (1998) has presented results that indicate that 12-month-old infants detect goals. The origins of subjective desire, however, is still an open question.

Here we proposed to start addressing the issue of subjective desire in young infants. In this task, thirty-two 10- and 11-month-old infants are familiarized with two scenarios. In (1), infants see the experimenter express disgust towards cracker/broccoli (‘yuk’), and in (2), infants see the experimenter express happiness towards broccoli/cracker (‘wow’). After the familiarization phase, the infants are then tested in one of two outcomes, the experimenter has a neutral expression and either grabs the broccoli, or the cracker. Parental reports on infants’ preferences are obtained to check their behavior against their performance in the task. If the infants have a psychological understanding of subjective desire, then they will expect the experimenter to grab the food towards which she expressed positive affect; if, on the other hand, the infants only have a behavioral understanding of desire, then they will be unable to determine the object of the experimenter’s desire because no specific cues are provided in the test phase. They will tend to respond egocentrically, and give the experimenter what they themselves like.

Preliminary results reveal that 10- and 11-month-old infants will look longer when the experimenter grabs the object towards which she expressed disgust. Data collection continues. Further steps towards the characterization of such ability are discussed.