

Child's Play: Anatomically Correct Dolls and Embodiment

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Abstract Anatomically detailed dolls have been used to elicit testimony from children in sex abuse cases. However, studies have shown they often provide false accounts in young, preschool-age children. Typically this problem is seen as a cognitive one: with age, children can correctly map their bodies onto a doll due to greater intellectual ability to *represent* themselves. I argue, along with the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, that although cognitive developments aid in the ability to represent one's own body, a discussion of *embodiment* is required in order to understand the use and abuse of anatomical dolls in forensic interviews. This paper examines these issues and maintains that a better understanding of embodied perception in both adults and children helps show how phenomenology can provide a more nuanced understanding to a troubling ethical and legal problem.

Keywords Anatomical dolls · Change blindness · Child psychology · Embodiment · Ecological psychology · Forensic interviews · Merleau-Ponty · Representation

Introduction

Anatomically correct dolls appear at first glance to be rather perverse things. The combination of a small toy with complete genitalia seems to bring sexual into a realm reserved for the innocence of childhood. Certainly, no small part of this reaction is our own upbringing where despite Barbie's prodigious breasts, her pelvis

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area is simply smooth. Ken, perhaps more amusingly, wears a permanent set of plastic underpants. Soft dolls tend to have no buttocks the legs reach straight to a rectangular torso. Gender is marked more by the length of hair rather than any distinguishing bodily features. My, as I imagine many women's, most interesting doll "down below" was one that you could feed and the food came out on a small diaper. But even this doll, who possessed a rather disturbing permanently open anus, did not possess any distinguishing genitalia.

The use of anatomically correct dolls in forensic interviews has come under fire in the past few decades. This debate illustrates some challenging issues in understanding representation of our bodies, our body image, body schema and memory. The debate takes place around child sexual abuse, thus not only are the successes and failures of using anatomically correct dolls interesting examples for a more subtle understanding of the development of our embodied awareness, a more subtle understanding could have important practical effects for the prosecution of child sex offenders.

This paper will take a largely phenomenological approach to understanding the use and abuse of anatomically correct dolls. It will first explore the status of the current empirical and forensic discussion of using anatomically correct dolls. Then, it will suggest that a phenomenological description of embodiment better grasps why anatomically correct dolls only sometimes evoke correct answers from young children. In accomplishing this description, I will illustrate how many parallels in adult experience belie the simple presence of representational intelligence in adult experience. Such a typical conception leads one to believe that young children's immature representational schemas mean they are incapable of accurately remembering the past. Whereas we, with our strong access to representational systems, accurately recall our past experiences. Instead, adult embodiment is not so simple. Our bodies are ourselves, but we do not live with our bodies as "representable things." Hence, even adults struggle to represent their bodily movements and past experiences abstractly. In addition, this paper hopes to indicate that the poor performance of preschoolers with anatomical dolls should not be taken as definitive proof they cannot be trusted in a forensic interview. Again, such a view supposes that ease as representing one's body is proof of knowing what happened. Rather, we need to better consider how our interviews might altogether misunderstand child and adult experience.

The Use and Abuse of Anatomical Dolls: A Case Study

Anatomically correct dolls, which I will henceforth call "anatomical dolls," are dolls with complete genitalia designed for use in the diagnosis and treatment of sexually abused children. Interviews with anatomical dolls are sometimes called upon in legal proceedings to prove or disprove child sexual abuse. Anatomical dolls are most often used by mental health professionals, social workers and law

enforcement officers in order to interview young children. Anatomical dolls are rarely discussed outside an institutional framework, be it the system designed to protect and heal children from abuse, the legal system designed to evaluate claims of abuse or the courts wherein abusers are tried. Thus, anatomical dolls are mainly discussed in forensic psychology, therapeutic child psychology, psychotherapy, psychiatry and criminology.

The concept behind the utility of such dolls is that young children have multiple reasons to not be forthcoming in describing sexual abuse. First, young children may lack the verbal skills to express what happened to them. Second, even if the children are reasonably verbally proficient, they may lack the vocabulary of abuse and/or a complete vocabulary about the human body. Third, the use of anatomical dolls allows for an additional method of communication. Given the high emotional charge surrounding abuse, it is difficult to question children in a delicate but effective manner. Anatomical dolls allow for an additional, non-verbal mode of expression. Fourth, anatomical dolls may trigger memories that the child has repressed or is extremely reluctant to reveal. Fifth, anatomical dolls may provide needed forensic detail beyond more vague and ill-defined expressions of abuse. Sixth, children are often working against shame, embarrassment and fear when being asked to describe abuse. Dolls may provide a way to “tell without telling.” Finally, the use of dolls might help avoid verbal coaching by the professional interviewing the child (Faller 2005).

Yet, despite the seeming advantages, the use of anatomical dolls in interviews has come under significant fire (Faller 2005; Dickinson et al. 2005; Everson and Boat 1997; Dammeyer 1998). A number of reasons likely contribute to this decline: moral uneasiness about the explicit bodies of anatomically correct dolls, the fear children that might be scarred if interviewed with anatomical dolls, and most pressing for this paper, the argument that anatomical dolls are not beneficial in the above-mentioned ways. Indeed, court challenges, many which arose out of the day-care abuse scandals of the 1980s, have called into question the validity of testimony received from using anatomical dolls. Research literature continues to debate the efficacy of anatomical dolls and legal disputes still abound when and interview using anatomical dolls becomes part of a court case.

Some of the critical questions raised in the use of anatomical dolls are perhaps as obvious as the benefits. Young children are easily swayed by the interviewers, thus if the interview asks a leading question, “Did X put his pee-pee in here?” whilst pointing to the dolls’ vagina a child might simply say “yes” thinking this is the desired response. Studies have shown that free-recall questions are the best with young children and have indicated that directed questioning and anatomical dolls have deleterious effects (Goodman et al. 1997: 55; Thierry et al. 2005). Guiding questions are often extended to young children given that they aren’t particularly loquacious and certainly because one wants to expose and punish child abusers. However, the possible consequences of such questions, even if they were posed with

the best possible intentions, include false imprisonment and the complete ruin of innocent lives.¹

Many studies have indicated that young children do not report more accurate information when using dolls than when not. After having young children, 2½–4 years of age, watch a Simon Says-style game, DeLoache and Marzolf asked them to recreate it with dolls. They found that children were more accurate when simply asked to report the activity than when they used the dolls (DeLoache and Marzolf 1995). Thus, even in a non-stressful situation preschoolers do not seem to use of the doll as a symbol of their past bodily experiences effectively.

Of course, much of the need to use anatomical dolls springs not from a framework where one is merely interested in understanding the intellectual development of correctly using symbols in developing a body image, but instead of the compelling need to evaluate the accuracy of child sex abuse allegations. Thus, one must ask: how can we know if young children can use anatomical dolls correctly in a stressful, invasive situation? The concept in the last decade that came to mind was to interview children who had undergone medical exams. This provided an invasive and stressful situation that nonetheless was an ethical one for the experimenters. Bruck and colleagues demonstrated that preschoolers failed to use anatomical dolls to correctly report the exam (Bruck et al. 2000; Bruck et al. 1995). Furthermore, Bruck et al. (2000, 1995) show that suggestive questions using dolls were *more* likely to elicit false replies than suggestive questions alone. Thus it isn't simply an issue of the young child's difficulty in handling the interview situation, the anatomical dolls actually *compound* inaccuracy. Ornstein and Haden (2002) summarize the problems with improving preschoolers memories with anatomical dolls, props, clearer guidelines as to what "yes" and "no" mean and found while dolls and props did improve recall, they also resulted in a larger, and unacceptable, amount of errors.

All forensic interviews with young children suffer from problems with accuracy and distortion in memory. Ceci et al. (1994) demonstrated how introducing a question of a rather fantastical event to young children who would have easily

¹ An example of the real legal consequences of the problems of guiding young children's testimony is the WeeCare daycare trial in the 1980s. Margaret Kelly Michaels a young twenty-three year old woman was accused of horrendous, systematic abuse of her young charges at the WeeCare daycare in Maplewood, N.J. The crimes included playing the piano in the nude, sexually penetrating them with various objects from Legos to light bulbs, and forcing them to eat excrement. Despite the fact that no physical evidence was found, no staff, family, or friends who freely entered the day care noticed anything amiss, no teachers who occupied the other half of the room which was only separated from the daycare by a sheet of plastic noticed anything and that almost no children volunteered stories of abuse, rather they only accused Michaels of abuse after hours of leading interviewing, Michaels was sentenced to forty-seven years in prison. She served five years before her case was overturned (Hass 1995). With little exception, opinion agrees with the overruling of the first judgment against Michaels. Other similar abuse cases remain contentious. The Amirault family of the Fells Acres day-care case on 1984 was not able to have their convictions overturned; the accused mother died whilst appealing her conviction, the son Gerald remains in prison, the daughter Cheryl Amirault LeFave will serve no more time in prison but cannot protest or speak about her conviction. Disturbing transcripts of the case include the state-appointed pediatric nurse repeatedly asking questions to children despite their denials of abuse. The questions go beyond leading; they repeat the same insinuation again and again until the child acquiesces (Mashberg and Hayward 1995).

remembered such an event did initially produce a negative reply. The children knew they had not, for instance, flown in a hot air balloon. However, when the interviewers continued to ask the children the same question each week for 10 weeks, 25% of the children started to “remember” the event and elaborated in great detail what the ride was like, what the balloon was like, etc. Thus, children are found to be able to accurately remember and report the past, but they are also found to be extremely suggestible to the point of being able to create false memories.

How a child recalls a situation has so much more to do with his/her lived past and future anticipations. In a study designed to try and map why different children of the same age show variances in recall ability, Goodman et al. (1997) interviewed children who underwent a painful urinary exam for children suffering from frequent incontinence or urinary tract infections. The researchers wanted to address the extreme personal differences in memory recall: not every child of five achieves the same level of accuracy and not every child of three cannot correctly report past events. Whilst these differences may not be statistically significant in studies of general child development, they are crucial in court cases where the individual child's experience and competence must be understood. Goodman studied the styles of parental upbringing and noted that children of securely attached parents, in other words of parents who have strong and healthy bonds with their children, produced less correct and incorrect responses with and without dolls (Goodman et al. 1997: 72). Whereas children of avoidant parents, parents who did not provide adequate attachment, produced much more extreme responses—either more correct about exactly what occurred or more inaccurate, elaborated responses of what occurred (Goodman et al. 1997: 72). Thus it would seem that children in an abusive household would be more likely to display more individual differences in ability to recount past events whereas children in non-abusive household would merely perform “average” on their ability to accurately recall a stressful event. Likely better attached parents provide more explanation about the impending stressful event, thus reducing its effect on the child.

Merleau-Ponty on Embodied Experience versus Representation

One manner in which to consider young children's experiences as impossible to map onto a doll is to suggest they retain a primary style of embodiment—a body schema—and have not formed a body image—a self-conscious set of thoughts, beliefs and feelings about how they look to others. This would be to emphasize that young children are not creating stories where none exist because they are internally preoccupied and thus are not really sure of their experiences, but rather because they are embedded in their lived situation.

Merleau-Ponty argues that embodied awareness is not achieved through compiling various associations, i.e., “the cup is there, my hand is here, I should move my hand to the cup space...” or a collecting of accurate representations, rather the body schema is an *attitude*. He writes that “my body appears to me as an attitude directed toward a certain existing or possible task. And indeed its spatiality is not, like that of external objects or like that of ‘spatial sensations’, a *spatiality of*

position, but a *spatiality of situation*.” (Merleau-Ponty 1945/1996: 100) What does it mean to call the body schema an “attitude”? A body schema has also been thought of as that most basic sense of bodily awareness which locates the individual in his/her situation. Thus, it isn’t the collection of thoughts and beliefs I have about where I am and who I am, but that underlying sense of location I have which allows me to grasp my coffee cup, to move my head when I hear a sound, to negotiate the hallway.

Our early embodiment qua possession of a body schema has been taken up in contemporary ecological psychology as an accurate model of our earliest experiences of the world. The emphasis upon the grounding nature of bodily experience dovetails nicely with the concept of an *ecological* self. If a child can, at least at times, report accurately past events, he or she must have a reasonably established sense of self. However, this self is likely closer to what the psychologist Ulric Neisser, amongst others, calls the *ecological* self and less robustly an *extended* and *private* self. Neisser has clarified the conception of the ecological self which I understand to be the contemporary psychological explication of Merleau-Ponty’s sense of embodiment. Neisser writes that, “The *ecological self* is the individual situated in and acting upon the immediate physical environment. That situation and that activity are continuously specified by visual/acoustic/kinesthetic/vestibular information.” (Neisser 1995: 18)² Neisser emphasizes that the ecological self must be aware of its position in the world and of its ability to act in the world. Selfhood requires that I am not just responsive and thus potentially demonstrating intentionality, but also that I display a sense of awareness of my situation in the world as *embodied*. “Intentionality may be a necessary condition of selfhood—no passive and purposeless entity is a self—but it is not sufficient. More stringent criteria are needed. The most fundamental of themes, I believe, is awareness of one’s situation in an independent, spatially extended environment.” (Neisser 1995: 23) This awareness is what Neisser understands to be the ecological self’s *embodied* condition, “The ecological self is not just located in the environment, but also *embodied*.” (Neisser 1995: 24) However, it is not until one forms a robust *extended* self, the self based on memories and anticipations, and a *private* self, the self which understand its own experiences are privately held, that one can expect the child to have a connection between a body-stand-in, i.e., the anatomical doll, and a private memory of the past (Neisser 1988).

Thus, young children certainly possess an ecological/embodied self as they show us that they are aware of their bodies’ relationship to the situation and see possibilities in that situation for creative action. In Merleau-Ponty’s words, they have an *attitude* about their lived situation. This kind of embodiment is not lost as

² “An ecological self is an individual who is, and perceives herself to be, located at a given place (or moving along a given path) in an extended environment of surfaces and objects. She has, and perceives herself to have, an extended body that is capable of interacting with the environment in a purposeful way...A first implication of this definition is that ecological selves are perceptually differentiated from their environments. The individual is *in* the environment but partly independent of it, moves *through* it, interacts *with* it, and consistently perceives this differentiated state of affairs. This achievement is only possible in species that are equipped with adequate perceptual systems, able to pick up the information that specifies the layout of the environment as well as the position and movement of the self.” (Neisser 1995: 21)

we age, but it underlies our basic, non-thematized experience of the world. As an embodied being, I am not representing the world around me to myself. Thus, I do not objectify or symbolize my situation as a context for my body. It would take some work to start bringing to mind the color, smell, feel, look of the room in which I sit. I am not a point in space relating to other spatially-located objects through intellectual manipulation. But simply because I do not represent the space to myself, it does not mean I am unaware of it. As we are well aware from habitual acts, it is actually not that easy to describe how one plays tennis, dances, types, swims. Indeed, one would likely have to stand up and re-enact the motion and give a rather ad hoc clumsy explanation of how to dance the foxtrot if one were a practiced dancer. Just imagine being given a small doll and being told: "With the doll, please represent how you served a tennis ball last Saturday," or, "Take this doll and show me the difference between a tango and a foxtrot." A more accurate recall would likely spring from you describing your entire experience or re-enacting it yourself and not from trying to use a figure to re-enact a particular moment. We simply do not add up moments of experience into a whole and then recall them at will. Lived experience is so much more than the motions our bodies make in an abstract space.

Playing tennis and attempting to recall an abusive situation are obviously highly dissimilar acts. However, it illustrates that physical actions are not, for adults in non-invasive normal situations, easy to map onto a doll. Certainly in a stressful situation, we could assume that mapping abilities would decrease in accuracy. We are less able to distance ourselves from our situation in times of emotional stress and hence likely less able to use an awkward set of symbols, even if they seem to be "like" our body, to re-enact our past.

In order to grasp the difference between older and younger children's ability to accurately recreate an abusive situation with dolls, we should be careful to consider *representational* intelligence as the only key to understanding this difference. This paints a model where not being able to represent one's situation would seem to entail a lack of awareness or engagement with it. Hopefully consideration of habitual actions shows that how difficulty in representing one's past actions does not necessarily mean one was not aware or engaged with the experience. Representational models, for Merleau-Ponty are a kind of faulty intellectualism that fail to describe our experience:

The Kantian subject posits a world, but, in order to be able to assert a truth, the actual subject must in the first place have a world or be in the world, that is, sustain round about it a system of meanings whose reciprocities, relationships and involvements do not require to be made explicit in order to be exploited. (Merleau-Ponty 1945/1996: 129)

One must begin with the embodied situation that underpins any intellectual analysis. Surely adults are typically better at understanding themselves as objects in the world relating to other objects and better able to symbolize and express this abstraction to others. Young children are reasonably able to provide correct responses to open-ended questions indicating that it isn't that they cannot recall past events or impose fantasy over all traumatic occurrences. Rather, they cannot take themselves as easily out of their present reality to return to an analysis of a past reality. They cannot take an object, such as a doll, out of context and map their past experiences onto it. The

anatomical doll, thus, instead of being a simple concrete representation of our bodies, requires a rather abstract intellectualization difficult for young children.

We witness the same problems occurring in adult perception, indicating that even when representational abilities are fully formed and well-functioning, perception is not a matter of visually recording and re-presenting the visual data to oneself. The much-studied phenomenon of selective attention has illustrated how we selectively exclude visual data which contradicts our normal experience. Change blindness is not to simply underline how we often fail to pay attention to what one might call the “corners” of our experience—the color of the carpet, the hair style of the hotel clerk—but rather the main objects of our focus can be changed without our knowing it. For instance, Levin and Simons discovered in a 1997 study that most people failed to note that the main actor of a movie was replaced by another person! Even more surprising is the fact that the majority of people do not notice if their conversation partner is changed with a completely different person (Simons and Levin 1998). One experiment achieves this effect by passing a door carried by workers between the interviewer and the test subject. Unbeknownst to the test subject, the interviewer changes places with another person, who does not look similar, but who acts as if nothing is amiss. Most test subjects fail to recognize the change.

What can account for this curious “blindness” in our attention? The brain sciences have been hotly examining how attention plays out in our grey matter to better understand why we do not immediately show shock or surprise when important parts of our focus are radically changed. Phenomenologically, we can express how our experience is not akin to a computer processor which without value assesses all of the givens in our perceptual field. Rather, we live in a world of embodied possible realities. We then, therefore, exclude the non sequitur because it is not a real, living possibility for us—“The normal person *reckons with* the possible, which thus, without shifting from its position as a possibility, acquires a sort of actuality.” (Merleau-Ponty 1945/1996: 109) People changing in the middle of an interview is not real possibility for our world and we, thus, exclude it from our aware experience. A small, ragdoll is simply not a person for a 3-year-old even if it arrives with a small cloth penis or vagina. For the preschooler, asking her to act “as if” is not a possible world.

This isn’t to say that we only are aware of what we are attentively directed toward. Certainly background experiences which we are not directly part of our experience are indeed part of the experience. But we find that even what we seem to be sensually processing in non-stressful, adult experiences is not necessarily what that adult is aware of, or even able to recall under questioning. Our embodied situation is one which is filled with anticipations, feelings, past experiences, and present distractions. Thus, we can ask if the primary issue facing young child is one of representation, then why do sophisticated “representers”—i.e. adults in normal situation—have problems representing even everyday occurrences?

Merleau-Ponty on the Child’s Sense of Reality

Jean Piaget famously argued that children were natural metaphysicians as that they attributed religious or magical explanations to various occurrences (Piaget and

Cartalis 1999). Piaget argued that the reason for such false beliefs in children is that they cannot process the world due to immature schemas of reality. This model holds strongly to a type of representationalist model; one needs a proper system in which to process information, thus without key concepts, one is simply unable to process certain experiences. A similar kind of conception seems to hold if we follow some criticisms of the use of anatomical dolls in interviewing young children. They simply are incapable of certain schemas, hence one cannot trust their recall. Due to these immature schemas, young children will often invent an imaginary story about their current or past situation.

Merleau-Ponty sharply criticizes a view which assumes the child is prone to fantasy in his/her relations with the world. One of the dominant themes in his lectures on child psychology at the Sorbonne, a position Merleau-Ponty held from 1949–1952 in a chair previously held by Jean Piaget himself, is that children are very much engaged and realistic about their experiences. To some degree, one can understand Merleau-Ponty as possessing the inverse of Piaget's "natural metaphysicans," Merleau-Ponty instead sees children as what we might call "natural phenomenologists"—their descriptions, drawings, and explanations of their experience are valuable for their lack of dependence upon abstract, idealistic adult models. It is our investment in a constructed, historical, cultural worldview that takes the child's view as "fantastical" when a careful phenomenological examination would reveal our own constructions.

One of Merleau-Ponty's objections to the conception that children readily create magical, unreal explanations for their experiences is the structure of Piaget's mode of investigation. He charges Piaget with creating interviews where children are led to magical constructions. Using the work of I. Huang, Merleau-Ponty (1949–1952/1988) observes that children give quite "rational" (given their knowledge) explanations of magic tricks or scientific illustrations of puzzling phenomena (i.e. a pencil "bending" in glass water when seen from the side) when one does not force their conclusions. Young children, Merleau-Ponty finds, are perplexed by experiences that lie outside their "schemas." They do not understand slight of hand tricks or optical illusions and thus cannot provide what we take as the "realistic" answer to their appearances—i.e., they cannot say that the reason a toothpick floats when lying flat but sinks when placed in water vertically is surface tension. They simply lack the concept of surface tension. However, does this mean they will say something unrealistic when asked what they think is occurring, thus making us wonder if any question posed to a child can be reasonably assured of obtaining an accurate response?

Children give engaged real replies to the toothpick question for instance. When not pushed by the interviewers, they hypothesize sensible ideas. Perhaps the toothpick was too dry? Or could it be that this water was frozen the first time? Maybe the end has oil on it so it "slips" in? These kind of answers show the children do intuitively understand the reality of their external world and are not naturally inclined to bring in "other-wordly" phenomena in their explanations. Indeed, children's natural delight at magic must itself be further considered. If children thought magic were an everyday kind of occurrence, why would they, like us, be transfixed by a good magician? Wouldn't a magician simply be about as interesting as someone working in the garden? Nothing special there, magic is

everywhere. Rather, even small children seem to know that these things, these disappearing bunnies and surprise quarters behind the ears, should not be happening! Most people who have seen a few magic shows at birthday parties have likely seen a child or two looking around for where the rabbit might be going and where it is hiding. They know this isn't quite right and hence their delight (or in one case I observed, their tears of fear that the rabbit had been smushed in the hat somehow!) Children's engagement with reality hardly seems flimsy.

In addition, when questioning children's responses, Huang looks into the larger picture of the child's life, Huang takes note of the economic and social circumstance of the children in order to understand if "magical explanations" were perhaps the result of certain class traditions. Like the work of attachment theory in Goodman et al.'s paper cited above, Huang notes that not all children invent fantastical stories. In fact, it is middle and upper class children who provide the most fantasy tales whereas working class children present very reasonable answers. Huang notes that working class children are less exposed to fairy tales and magical stories. Thus, it isn't that children naturally tend toward magical stories, but rather adults give them magical stories as entertainment and only then do they "spontaneously" adopt them. Piaget fails, in Merleau-Ponty's estimation, to take into account the child's larger environment and assumes one can map child development as universal. What Merleau-Ponty values about Huang's descriptions is his focus upon a real event and allowing the child to offer his or her own responses, "Huang places the child before 'a real event involving concrete and tangible objects (as opposed to a situation created by language), an event capable of evoking responses similar to those that child presents in his or her everyday life.'" (Merleau-Ponty 1949–1952/1988: 509)

Piaget's error is to confront the child with objects with which the child is unfamiliar. The child subsequently responds to the interview situation and does not direct him/herself to the object of inquiry Piaget has chosen—"Piaget, on the other hand, interrogates the child with regard to subjects with which the child has never been confronted. The result of Piaget's interrogations is that the child's responds in reaction to a verbal situation." (Merleau-Ponty 1949–1952/1988: 509) Merleau-Ponty notes that, normally, children initially search for a rational explanation and if pushed to offer an explanation, only then do they tend toward the fantastical.

How can this analysis accord with the fantastical explanations given by children in false testimonies? The daycare abuse scandals of the 1980s presented us with children voicing absurd stories of underground tunnels, spacecraft and Satanic rituals. Certainly we can account for coaching and suggestion as playing key roles in these accounts. Merleau-Ponty also cites the work on child psychologist Henri Wallon to explain why children might on their own accord, in some cases, tend toward imaginary stories.

Wallon develops the concept of "ultra-things" to explain how children understand their world. Wallon teaches that things in the child's experience which are present but not directly experienced operate as these ultra-things. For instance, while children can provide reasonable, grounded explanations for magic tricks, they tend toward more imaginative responses when questioned about death or birth. These types of limit-experiences are not bodily, they are not open to the child's natural sense of place in the world. Merleau-Ponty lectures—"Such beings are not

fully grasped by simply looking at them and children cannot change them by willing or by moving their bodies...The earth and the sky are exemplar ‘ultra-things,’ and as such are always incompletely determined by the child.” (Merleau-Ponty 1949–1952/1988: 242)

For instance, children will acknowledge that their parents must have existed once as children, but only give lip-service to this idea. Death is not grasped as an event because it is never part of one’s experience of what events are. Thus, unless the death is of a person or animal in the child’s life, it remains less troubling than it does for adults. The child’s own existence is also an ultra-thing which, according to Wallon and Merleau-Ponty, it is in the case of adults too:

On this level, the child is incapable of conceiving of not having always existed. Moreover, even for the adult awareness it is impossible to really conceive of one’s own birth and death. As a result, the subject feels coextensive with Being, and this belief, Wallon stresses, is inherent in subjectivity. In a sense, it persists in the adult: we are not able to think outside all points of view, we can push the frontiers of ‘ultra-things’ further (e.g., in learning the Copernican system), but we cannot eliminate them completely. (Merleau-Ponty 1949–1952/1988: 242)

Children are similar to adults in that their world-views strive toward harmony and completeness; they search for rational explanations. A present circumstance, looking at a doll and being asked to recall a possibly traumatic past situation with it, will be adjusted to, but not in an abstract manner. Children cannot abstract themselves and from their own existence, but this does not mean they are not cognizant of their experience.

Merleau-Ponty calls for “a more human relation” to be established between the adult and child when we recognize our own “ultra-things” and given the above, our own inability to process our experiential world solely through accurate representations—“A more human relation could be established between the adult and the child, in which the child is not imprisoned in a magical world, because the adult can comprehend the child’s pre-objective experience by virtue of the fact that the ‘ultra-thing’ forms the horizon of his or her own experience.” (Merleau-Ponty 1949–1952/1988: 243) In so doing, the adult can realize the continuity between his/her embodiment and that of the child, “Thus, the adult could find within him or herself the equivalent of the child’s situation.” (Merleau-Ponty 1949–1952/1988: 243).

Conclusion

One of the main hopes of this paper is to indicate how phenomenological analyses of our embodied experience might bring a fresh and needed perspective to understanding a practical problem with children’s testimony. Certainly the lion’s share of the fight occurs on the ground and far from the reach of such academic discussions of body schemas, and representational frameworks, phenomenology can bring a needed shift of attention for the empirical debate. What is most disturbing in the empirical literature about this one aspect of interviewing alleged victims of child sex abuse—the use of

anatomical dolls—is how the debate takes place. The question is: are anatomical dolls in age group \times appropriate tools? Experiments are run and conclusions are drawn both for and against the use of dolls. These conclusions do have real effects on court cases as their authors appear as expert witnesses. I believe that the critical literature on the abuse of anatomical dolls is important to underline for fear of falsely imprisoning alleged abusers, but it tends to be too easily incorporated into the idea that young children are, given their inability to represent their past actions with a doll, *unable* to accurately understand and recall their experiences. There is great worry that such studies allow for real abusers to get off if they have abused young children and no physical evidence is recovered (normally little conclusive physical evidence is present in frequent child sex abuse) (Faller 2005).

Yet, the experiments and conclusions do not stop to consider if the issue of representation of one's own body is the key issue in the use of anatomical dolls. Furthermore, it assumes that good representative recall is somehow indicative of a better connection with reality. Our own experienced world is shot through with inaccurate representational recall of our direct experience: we don't even necessarily represent changes that take place in front of our face. I do not think this means we are living in fantasy world, but that our perceptual experience is in no way akin to a movie camera that without bias records what occurs in front of us. We must stop to ask what the experience of the child is like and stop assuming it is a proto-functional representational machine. Our world is not a representational machine, why make this demand upon preschoolers to live up to an inaccurate view of perceptual experience? If we achieve some better sense of the phenomenological experience of the young child, we might see way to creating better interviewing techniques to elicit accurate information about past events which is so needed in the just prosecution of child sex abuse.

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