

# Noted Psychologist Susan Gelman Visits Hillsdale

**KIDS SAY** the darndest things. But how do they come up with the things they say? How do their young minds process the information around them? Last September, the Hillsdale College Psychology Department hosted a lecture by Dr. Susan Gelman, the Frederick G.L. Huetwell Professor of Psychology at the University of Michigan, entitled "What's Essential in Children's Concepts." Gelman, one of the most influential figures in developmental psychology today, fascinated the student and faculty audience with her discussion of the nature of concepts.

The basic premise behind Dr. Gelman's research is that children as young as four or five years of age conceptualize concepts as having essences. An essence is a quality that cannot be observed directly, but that accounts for features that can be observed. To support her theory, Gelman offered examples from her experimental research.

When talking to a group of children, Gelman presents them with pictures of three animals—a blackbird, a flamingo and a bat, and labels them a bird, a bird and a bat. She tells the children that the mother blackbird chews up food for its young, thereby making the food easier for the babies to digest. She then asks which other animal in that group does the same for its young. One would think kids would say bat, since the bat is more similar in size and color to the blackbird than the flamingo. But even at four years of age, kids know that the flamingo is a bird and conclude that it does the same thing with its food as the blackbird. They recognize that there is an essence that makes a bird a bird.



Miriam Leja, '06, Megan Treece, '03, Rob Hufnagel, '03, Cecilia Sinclair, '04 and Danielle Miller, '03, visited with Dr. Susan Gelman (center) following her lecture.

Gelman also offers children an interesting hypothetical example of two babies switched at birth—one born to English-speaking parents and one born to Portuguese-speaking parents. Gelman plays an audio tape of English and of Portuguese so the children can hear the two different languages. She explains that the Portuguese-speaking parents raise the baby born to the English-speaking parents, and the English-speaking parents raise the baby born to the Portuguese-speaking parents. When she asks the children what language they think each child will speak, they answer that the baby born to English-speaking parents will speak English and the baby born to the Portuguese-speaking parents will speak Portuguese, regardless of the environment in which they grow up.

Examples such as these shed light on the cognitive development of children and illuminate the very nature of their concepts.

Having published over 100 scientific articles and books and having won numerous awards, including the Distinguished Scientific Award from the American Psychological Association for Early Career Contribution to Psychology, Dr. Gelman's impressive background served to emphasize the importance of her presentation.

"Dr. Susan Gelman is one of only about five developmental psychologists in the country of

## Dr. Susan Gelman

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such high stature," said Hillsdale Associate Professor of Psychology Dr. Don Ernst. "Our students were really excited to hear her talk and visit with her."