

PSYCHOLOGY 456
Theory of Mind

Winter 2022
W: 10:00–11:20; F: 8:30–9:50
First 6 weeks: Online
Second 6 weeks: 304 Kingston

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Learning Objectives

- Define “theory of mind” and distinguish theory of mind from other forms of social intelligence
- Identify the key ways in which theory of mind understandings are measured in young children, and how performance on these measurements change with development
- Catalog different factors that can affect theory of mind understanding as it develops over the preschool years.
- Critically evaluate different theories for theory of mind development at different ages, and assess these theories with respect to the extant literature
- Assess the hypothesis that theory of mind understandings provide a necessary foundation for sophisticated social behavior throughout development.
- Critically examine and assess the hypothesis that some developmental disorders are associated with “deficits” in theory of mind.
- Critically examine and assess the hypothesis that individual differences in theory of mind reasoning are associated with meaningful social outcomes throughout development.

Course Outline

Theory of mind is the everyday understanding that people do things because of their mental states such as intentions, beliefs, and desires. We call it a “theory”

because we cannot see these mental states — they are powerful theoretical constructs. We commonly rely on theory of mind understandings to both explain what a person has done, and predict what that person will do in the future. Some researchers and theorists use the term “folk psychology” to describe theory of mind. It is our everyday, non-scientific, understanding of the basic psychological mechanisms that cause everyday behaviour. The goal of this course is to explore what it means to have a theory of mind, critically review the research on how theory of mind develops in young children, and apply a theory of mind framework to understand how we negotiate the social world across the lifespan.

For some time now, developmental psychologists have been studying the developmental timetable and trajectory of young children’s theory of mind. Hundreds of studies have been published investigating young children’s understanding of psychological states and how they affect behaviour. This literature is diverse yet coherent, and arguably we know more about this one particular aspect of human cognitive development than any other. Because of its richness, researchers have used theory of mind as a window on children’s cognitive development more generally; as the basic phenomena that constitute theory of mind reasoning are gradually uncovered, so too are fundamental insights into the very mechanisms by which development takes place.

Clinicians have also found that the theory of mind framework is a useful one for understanding conditions that are particularly associated with social-cognitive difficulties. Theory of mind hypotheses have been advanced for a wide range of clinical diagnoses, including autism, schizophrenia, and depression. Outside of the clinical realm, there is some evidence that variation in one’s theory of mind skills may have important implications for observable measures of social competence, including the ability to establish a social network. Thus, theory of mind development is not only an interesting topic of study, it is also of practical importance.

General Structure of the Course

The course will be divided into two modules, each comprising 6 weeks of the class.

Module I: Weeks 1–6

In the first module, we will learn how researchers conceptualize theory of mind, and the developmental trajectory of theory of mind concepts in young children. In each case, we will gain exposure to important general issues that face developmental psychologists, such problems of interpreting children’s behaviour in experimental tasks, characterizing theoretical mechanisms of development, and understanding the interplay between biology and experience in shaping development.

This module is going to be conducted over MS Teams, synchronous and online. For each class during this module, we will have a reading or two that students will

be expected to have read in advance. For the first part of the class, I will give a lecture-style presentation that situates the readings in the broader context of the field. Then we will have a discussion period that begins with folks in breakout groups talking about the days discussion topic. For the last 20 minutes or so we will then get back together to share out the groups thoughts, with particular focus on anything that was puzzling, surprising, challenging, or otherwise noteworthy.

To help ensure that folks are prepared for the day's discussion, everyone will be asked to compose a a short, informal "reaction" paper for one of the day's readings. The guidelines for this are attached.

The main assessment for Module I is a take-home essay exam. At the end of week 4, I will assign four essay questions related to the material that is covered in the first module. Responses to these essay questions will be due on Monday, March 7 (Week 8). The reason for this due date is that I wanted to give people some breathing room after reading week, knowing that some might be transitioning back to Kingston. Please be aware that if you leave all of the take-home exam writing to Week 7 (our first week back), then that will be a very busy week for you. My hope is that by handing out the questions so early you will be able to get a jump on the process.

Module II

For the second module, we are planning to be back in person. We will build on the basics acquired in the first module to explore how a theory of mind perspective can help us to understand how people can successfully negotiate a wide range of meaningful interpersonal phenomena across the lifespan (infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, aging).

To achieve these goals, students will work throughout the module in a group. On the first day, we will work as a class to identify six psychological phenomena to explore from a theory of mind perspective. Each group will tackle one of the six challenges and be responsible for three main goals: a) conceptualizing through how a theory of mind perspective on the phenomenon might be useful, b) finding and reviewing the extant literature that may speak to whether theory of mind skills are indeed related to the phenomenon under consideration, and c) identifying future directions for research on the topic.

The ultimate product for the group will be to co-author a review article like those that are published in a general psychology journal called Trends in Cognitive Sciences. There are many examples of what these kinds of papers can look like and I will go over one in detail for the class. Typically, TiCS papers comprise a 3000 word organized essay review that is accompanied by figures and "boxes" that provide succinct summaries of research paradigms, a general pattern of research findings, or a specific study's worth of data from a paper that illustrates a key phenomenon. The reason for choosing this format in particular is that it is a flexible one with many options for *creatively* and clearly communicating important

information to a broad population.

In the first two weeks, we will take class time for group work to conceptualize the paper. The goal is that by the end of these first two weeks, groups will submit to me a basic outline for their review papers, and a detailed plan for how the work will be divided evenly among the members of the group.

In the next week, I will ask each group to make a brief presentation to the class that describes the main phenomenon they're covering and why they think a theory of mind perspective will be valuable for that. My preference is for groups to engage with this presentation in a way that makes it fun and engaging. In the past, I asked all groups to make their presentations in the PechaKucha style (<https://www.pechakucha.org/faq>). I'm not doing that this time around (it's a little crazy) but I will still encourage you to play with the presentation a bit and make it fun.

The purpose of this initial presentation is to 1) introduce the topic to the larger group, 2) express *why* you think a theory of mind perspective on the topic is going to be useful, and 3) to outline the approach your group is going to take to establishing a connection with theory of mind. Although our class time during this week will be taken up with presentations, I expect that students will continue working on their research and writing outside of class hours.

Following these, we will have three more classes devoted to group work. It is my hope that members of the group will have rough drafts of their contributions to the TiCS article and will thus have the opportunity to get constructive feedback on the ideas and writing from their other group members. By the end of this period, the article should have its basic form, even if it is rough.

Finally in each of the last three days of class, we will have two groups per class make presentations to communicate the results of their research. This presentation should remind the class of the introductory material that was presented in week 9 but then then delve more deeply into the research that they have done. As with the first presentations, the purpose is to encourage groups to make progress toward their goals while communicating material to the rest of the students in the course. Presentations can be up to 30 minutes long each (inclusive of discussion time), and we will leave some time at the end for the rest of the students in the course to evaluate what they have learned.

Each group's TiCS paper will be due on Tuesday April 12, which is the first Tuesday after classes officially end. Only one paper will be submitted along with a *detailed description* of the work that each person in the group did, agreed upon and attested by each member of the group.

Late Policy

Late work will be accepted but its mark will be discounted by 20% for each 24 hour period it is late. Exceptions to this policy are if serious extenuating circumstances

prevented you from completing the work, or if we have a prearranged agreement. Please do not hesitate to communicate with me regarding any difficulties you may be having completing the course material to your standards on time.

Grading Scheme

Assessment for Module 1

- 45% – Reading response papers
- 10% – Discussion participation
- 45% – Take-home Essay Questions

Assessment for Module 2

- 20% – Conscientiousness, leadership, and cooperation in the group setting as rated by the other members of your group (and apparent to me)
- 25% – Quality of unique contribution to the presentations
- 35% – Quality of unique contribution to the review paper
- 20% – Overall integrated quality of presentation and the TiCS paper.

Grading Method

All components of this course will receive numerical percentage marks. The final grade you receive for the course will be derived by converting your numerical course average to a letter grade according to Queen's Official Grade Conversion Scale:

Grade	Range
A+	90–100
A	85–89
A-	80–84
A+	77–89
B	73–76
B-	70–72
C+	67–69
C	63–66
C-	60–62
D+	57–59
D	53–56
D-	50–52
F	<50

Academic Integrity

Queen's students, faculty, administrators and staff all have responsibilities for supporting and upholding the fundamental values of academic integrity. Academic integrity is constituted by the five core fundamental values of honesty, trust, fairness, respect and responsibility (see www.academicintegrity.org) and by the quality of courage. These values and qualities are central to the building, nurturing and sustaining of an academic community in which all members of the community will thrive. Adherence to the values expressed through academic integrity forms a foundation for the "freedom of inquiry and exchange of ideas" essential to the intellectual life of the University.

Students are responsible for familiarizing themselves with and adhering to the regulations concerning academic integrity. General information on academic integrity is available at Integrity@Queen's University, along with Faculty or School specific information. Departures from academic integrity include, but are not limited to, plagiarism, use of unauthorized materials, facilitation, forgery and falsification. Actions which contravene the regulation on academic integrity carry sanctions that can range from a warning, to loss of grades on an assignment, to failure of a course, to requirement to withdraw from the university.

Accessibility & Accommodation

Queen's University is committed to achieving full accessibility for persons with disabilities. Part of this commitment includes arranging academic accommodations for students with disabilities to ensure they have an equitable opportunity to participate in all of their academic activities. If you are a student with a disability and think you may need accommodations, you are strongly encouraged to contact Student Wellness Services (SWS) and register as early as possible. For more information, including important deadlines, please visit the Student Wellness website at: <http://www.queensu.ca/studentwellness/accessibility-services/>

Extenuating Circumstances

The Senate Policy on Academic Consideration for Students in Extenuating Circumstances (<https://tinyurl.com/yaj7be64>) was approved in April, 2017. Queen's University is committed to providing academic consideration to students experiencing extenuating circumstances that are beyond their control and which have a direct and substantial impact on their ability to meet essential academic requirements. The Faculty of Arts and Science has developed a protocol to provide a consistent and equitable approach in dealing with requests for academic consideration for students facing extenuating circumstances, which can be found at: <http://www.queensu.ca/artsci/accommodations>

Course Schedule and Readings for Module I

What is a theory of mind?

Wednesday, Jan 12: Introduction to the class and to one another

Friday, Jan 14: Social intelligence & social cognition

MacLean, E. L., Herrmann, E., Suchindran, S., & Hare, B. (2017). Individual differences in cooperative communicative skills are more similar between dogs and humans than chimpanzees. *Animal Behaviour*, 126, 41–51. doi: 10.1016/j.anbehav.2017.01.005

Diagnosing Theory of Mind in Children

Wednesday, Jan 19: The “false belief task”

Wellman, H. M., Cross, D. & Watson, J. (2001). Meta-analysis of theory-of-mind development: The truth about false belief. *Child Development*, 72, 655–684.

Friday, Jan 21: False belief in younger children and infants

Scott, R. M. & Baillargeon, R. (2017). Early false-belief understanding. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 21, 237–249. doi: 10.1016/j.tics.2017.01.012.

Heyes, C. (2014). False belief in infancy: a fresh look. *Developmental Science*, 17, 647–654.

Executive functioning and theory of mind

Wednesday, Jan 26: Overview

Devine, R. T. & Hughes, C. (2014). Relations between false belief understanding and executive function in early childhood: A meta-analysis. *Child Development*, 85, 1777–1794.

Friday, Jan 28: Expression/Emergence

Sabbagh, M. A., Xu, F., Carlson, S. M., Moses, L. J., & Lee, K. (2006). Executive functioning and theory of mind in preschool children from Beijing, China: Comparisons with U.S. preschoolers. *Psychological Science*, 17, 74–81.

Benson, J. E., Sabbagh, M. A., Carlson, S. M., & Zelazo, P. D. (2013). Individual differences in executive functioning predict preschoolers’

improvement from theory-of-mind training. *Developmental Psychology*, 49, 1615–1627.

Broader Conceptualizations

Wednesday, Feb 2: Emerging understandings

Wellman, H. M. & Liu, D. (2004). Scaling theory-of-mind tasks. *Child Development*, 75, 523–541.

Friday, Feb 4: Integrating the mental world

Lagattuta, K. H., Kramer, H. J., Kennedy, K., Hjortsvang, K., Goldfarb, D. & Tashjian, S. (2015). Beyond Sally's missing marble: Further development in children's understanding of mind and emotion in middle childhood. *Advances in Child Development and Behavior*, 48, 185–217.

Biological Bases of Theory of Mind

Wednesday, Feb 9: Brain Development

Gweon, H., Dodell-Feder, D., Bedny, M., & Saxe, R., (2012). Theory of mind performance in children correlates with functional specialization of a brain region for thinking about thoughts. *Child Development*, 83, 1853–1868. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-8624.2012.01829.x

Friday, Feb 11: Neurobiology & Temperament

Sabbagh, M. A. (2016). Dopamine and theory of mind in preschoolers. In J. Sommerville & J. Decety (Eds.) *Social Cognition: Development across the lifespan*.

Mink, D., Henning, A., & Aschersleben, G. (2014). Infant shy temperament predicts preschoolers' theory of mind. *Infant Behavior and Development*, 37, 66–75. doi: 10.1016/j.infbeh.2013.12.001

Experience

Wednesday, Feb 16: Thinking culturally about theory of mind

Lavelle, J. S. (2021). The impact of culture on mindreading. *Synthese*, 198, 6351–6374. doi: 10.1007/s11229-019-02466-5

Friday, Feb 18: Family influences

Devine, R. T., & Hughes, C. (2017). Let's talk: Parent's mental talk (not mind-mindedness or mindreading capacity) predicts children's false belief understanding. *Child Development*. doi: 10.1111/cdev.12990

Schedule for Module II

Prepare outlines

Wednesday, Mar 2: Brainstorm topics, create groups, plan attack

Friday, March 4: Share background research, brainstorm outlines, solidify scope of individual contributions

Wednesday, Mar 9: Continue to share research, refine plans for individual contributions, including all aspects of TiCS format

Friday, Mar 11: Complete outlines for review papers and detailed plans for dividing work equally are due at the end of class.

Brief Presentations

Although this week we will have group presentations in class, I am assuming that everyone will be continuing their work on their contributions to the review papers outside of class. This will include doing the research, integrating thoughts, and beginning work on a rough draft of their contribution.

Wednesday, Mar 16: Presentations from groups A, B, & C.

Friday, Mar 18: Presentations from groups D, E, & F.

Preparation of TiCS paper and Final Presentations

Wednesday, Mar 23

Friday, Mar 25

Wednesday, Mar 30

Over these three days, group members should be circulating rough drafts of their unique contributions to the review paper to other group members for feedback, editing, and integration into the whole paper. Group members should also be working together to finalize formatting decisions, glossaries, figures, "boxes," and other unique aspects of the TiCS paper.

Final Presentations

Friday, Apr 1 Groups A & F

Wednesday, Apr 6: Groups C & D

Friday, Apr 8: Groups B & E