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# Adult theory of mind, cooperation, Machiavellianism: The effect of mindreading on social relations

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## Abstract

Theory of mind – the ability to attribute independent mental states and processes to others – plays an important role in our social lives. For one, it facilitates social cooperation, for two, it enables us to manipulate others in order to reach our own goals. In our study, we intend to analyze some basic aspects of the complex relationship between adult theory of mind and social behavior that had not been researched in depth so far. Our results show (1) a strong negative correlation between Machiavellianism and social cooperative skills; (2) a connection between the extent of cooperative tendency and the level of mindreading; and (3) a lack of significant correlation between theory of mind and Machiavellianism. For the interpretation of the results – especially for our third finding – we used the concepts of “hot” and “cold” empathy, the lack of representation of moral emotions, as well as other cognitive explanatory models.

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*Keywords:* Adult theory of mind; Machiavellianism; Cooperation; “Hot” and “cold” empathy

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. *Theory of mind*

As it is well known, the term theory of mind refers to the capacity to attribute certain independent mental states, contents *and processes* to others – such as desires, concepts, intentions and emotions. The functioning of the theory of mind enables us to perceive others as distinct physical and mental entities, to acknowledge their inner world that guides their behavior, but is hidden from the senses (Astington, 2003).

Many researchers hold that the attribution of mental states evolves through a several-year-long maturing process from such cognitive precursors as mutual attention, social imitation and pretend play (Baron-Cohen, 1991; Stone, Baron-Cohen, & Knight, 1998). Much less do we know about adult mentalizing ability and the role it plays in social relations. From the few studies available, it is worth highlighting the research of Kinderman, Dunbar, and Bentall (1998). This research revealed that individual differences in mentalizing ability are not attributable to individual variances in working memory capacity. The findings also lead to the conclusion that the cognitive skills required for understanding the mental contents of a person differ from those necessary for recalling the factual events related to this person. Moreover, it seems that mindreading is restricted by strict cognitive limits; beyond a certain level of complexity the great majority of adults find it difficult to follow what people think of one another's mental activities.

### 1.2. *Mindreading capacity and social skills*

It is clear from the above that theory of mind plays a pivotal role in our social lives. When we engage in social interactions with others, we make constant observations and inferences concerning their mental states. These observations and inferences enable us to explain others' behavior by detecting the underlying motivations; to make predictions for their future actions; what is more, our own behavior and attitudes towards other people are shaped by these activities (Astington, 2003). The close connection between theory of mind and social skills is well demonstrated by the investigations involving people living with autism (Langdon, 2003). It is well known that they have serious deficiencies in recognizing facial expressions, understanding others' emotions, and interpreting subtle differences and elements of social interactions. A number of theorists attribute these deficiencies to their poor mindreading skills (Baron-Cohen, Leslie, & Frith, 1985).

The advanced capacity of mindreading brings advantage in two important areas of interpersonal relations (Davis & Stone, 2003; Slaughter & Repacholi, 2003). First, it makes it easier to cooperate with others by facilitating the development of mutual attunement among the group members, which is a prime necessity for successful cooperation. Second, a well-developed ability to attribute mental states to others enhances competitive skills as it enables individuals to gain advantageous positions or, in certain cases, manipulate others in order to realize their own goals.

### 1.3. *Empathy*

Researchers seem to agree that prosocial behavior patterns are based on the capacity to feel empathy (Nichols, 2001). However, it poses certain difficulties that the term empathy does not

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