

# INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN CHILDREN'S DEVELOPING THEORY OF MIND AND IMPLICATIONS FOR METACOGNITION

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**ABSTRACT:** For readers interested in metacognition broadly, this review article introduces some of the recent research and theory concerning children's developing understanding of mental states, focusing particularly on attempts to understand individual differences in development. We contend that the conceptual developments investigated by "theory of mind" researchers constitute a foundation for later metacognition. We examine studies that have focused on individual differences in children's developing understanding of mental states, particularly those investigating its antecedents in early social interactions. Implications from theory-of-mind research for an understanding of metacognition are articulated.

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"He thinks the chair moves by itself." Three-year-old Adam's spontaneous attribution of a false belief to his baby brother, who is swinging, reflects an everyday sort of metacognition that has recently commanded considerable attention from developmental researchers. Children's early understanding of the mental states of themselves and others has been intensively investigated in the last decade, reflecting growing enthusiasm for an area now known as "theory of mind."

In keeping with the spirit of this special issue, our first aim is to introduce theory of mind research to readers unfamiliar with it but interested in metacognition more broadly. We will suggest that children's initial acquisition of mental state concepts provides a foundation for later metacognition. Our second aim is to explore what is known about individual differences in children's developing understanding of mental states. Although relatively little research

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**Learning and Individual Differences**, Volume 8, Number 4, 1996, pages 281-304.  
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ISSN: 1041-6080

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has targeted individual differences in theory of mind, what has been done contributes uniquely to a broader discussion of metacognition.

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### THEORY OF MIND: PREREQUISITE FOR METACOGNITION

We are all folk psychologists. Every day we attempt to predict and explain things concerning ourselves and other people, such as behavior, thoughts, and emotions. In western industrialized cultures (and perhaps others), people's everyday actions are viewed as the products of mental states and processes—intentions, beliefs, hopes, fears, wishes, and so forth. Intentional behavior is explained in terms of what people want and what they believe. For example, we might explain that Mary ran out of the house because she *thought* it was on fire and she *wanted* to be safe.

Philosophers (e.g., Dennett 1978) have frequently observed that two mental state constructs—desires and beliefs—are fundamental to this sort of ubiquitous naive psychological reasoning. More recently, cognitive anthropologists (e.g., D'Andrade 1987) and developmental psychologists (e.g., Wellman 1990) have subscribed to the notion that everyday reasoning about human behavior can be characterized as belief-desire mentalism or even as a "theory of mind" in which the central constructs are beliefs and desires. Among developmentalists, it is widely believed that some such basic understanding of the existence and nature of mental states must underlie sophisticated thinking of many kinds, including metacognition (e.g., Astington 1993; Bartsch & Wellman 1995; Flavell, Miller & Miller 1993; Perner 1991; Wellman 1985a, 1985b, 1990). As "cognition about cognition," metacognition minimally presumes a recognition of the existence of cognition as a mental state or activity. That is, it would seem that in order for individuals to engage in thinking about or regulating their own cognition, they must have the concept of cognition.

In his chapter "The origins of metacognition," Wellman (1985a, p. 29) proposed that "metacognition consists of a large, multi-faceted theory of mind." It might be more precise to say that, insofar as a theory of mind (at least a Western adult one) posits both motivational states such as desires and cognitions such as beliefs and ideas, it constitutes the framework within which more specific metacognitive understandings (e.g., a recognition that delay affects memory) can develop.

The characterization of this underlying framework as a theory is arguably the dominant view among researchers in this area, hence the "theory of mind" label. Wellman (e.g., Bartsch & Wellman 1995; Wellman 1985b, 1990) and Gopnik (e.g., Gopnik 1993; Gopnik & Wellman 1994, 1992) have articulated one version of this account, agreeing that children's growing understanding of a variety of domains, including psychology, resembles scientific theory development in several important respects. Three characteristics of scientific theories are that they are coherent

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