

# Theories of autism and the mind



## Theory of mind

### Abstract

The paper details more on the autism and the components relating to the child's theory of mind. Great insights will be discussed on how these components vary in children suffering with autism. Children socialize and interact through a given concept and a cognitive mechanism which is referred to as the theory of mind. The theory of mind explains the sets of intellectual capacities for the children to be able to detail and infer the feelings, emotions, and attitudes of other individuals. There are a number of components and concepts that revolves around the theory of mind; these include the understanding of people's beliefs, desires, and intentions. Once an individual has such understanding, it will be easier to understand their knowledge, beliefs and emotions and be in a position to navigate their social situations. The theory of mind in this context will play a key role in leading us to clearly understand the autism. Autism alludes to a complex state of disorder which is characterized by some sort of challenges when it comes to social skills. Autism is caused by some prenatal viral infections. In most cases, the condition dominates in the child's inability to communicate and interact with other people. Additionally, a child's communication is said to be affected greatly by the existence of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). According to (Miller, 2012) it is clear that children at the age of four starts developing the theory of mind and can be able to comprehend that an individual may be behaving based on a false or beliefs about an event posted to them. Nevertheless, the theory of mind might delay for the children with autism and some higher level of skills might not be attained at

all for those suffering with ASD. This paper will offer insights in establishing different components that make up the theory of mind and how this theory differs in children with autism.

## Introduction

It is evident that the theory of mind varies differently in children and individuals with autism. In this case, where a child was initially active, engaged and growing in a healthier manner but changed instantly, this might be a case that the child is suffering from autism. The developmental issues posted to children might lead to a significant rise of autism and delayed theory of mind. There are some behaviors that a child might exhibit so as one to elude that the child is suffering from Autism Spectrum Disorder. Nevertheless, the behaviors might vary from one child to the other depending on the level of ASD affecting that particular child (Slaughter, 2007). For instance, a child's mind might not be in a position to reflect and establish the conversation, objects, and hidden information about something. The children who are diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder mainly suffer from social disconnections with other people in the society; this being one of the early signs of Autism Spectrum Disorder.

The discussion on the theory of mind in children with autism gets to draw much interest on the aspects of consciousness and reality. It tends to detail more on what other individuals are thinking or feeling towards the things that take place in the society. The theory of mind develops differently among the children; it takes place when children are at their tender age; the age between 3 and 4 years. Nevertheless, the theory of mind might take

relatively longer period of time to establish in children with autism (Wellman, 2004). Researchers have shown that the age gap between 5 and 13 years of those with autism receives relatively lower score when it comes to having a glimpse of other's emotions and beliefs than how their counterparts who are developing healthily do (Slaughter, 2007). The theory of mind is perceived to predict ASD diagnosis in that those with relatively lower level of skills are attached to experience relatively higher diagnoses in comparison with those experiencing sophisticated theory of mind skills.

#### How the theory of mind develops in children

During their tender age, children are able to absorb early skills which play crucial role in developing their theory of mind. The skills learned at this tender age includes the ability to pay close attention to people they interact with and copy them in their minds, the ability to recognize people's emotions and react towards the moods, the knowledge that people act as per the things they want, and pretending to be someone else more so when they play their skits (Miller, 2012). Nevertheless, these skills might differ significantly to those children suffering under the Autism Spectrum Disorder; this set of children will be unable to communicate and reflect their skills with others due to the delayed skills development. At the age between 4 and 5 years, one can clearly tell whether or not the child is suffering from autism; this is due to the fact that the child will deviate from the normal operations, detach themselves from other children hence becoming socially affected (Peterson, 2012). At this age, the child will start to have feelings and thoughts about other people; therefore, the theory of mind starts to emerge.

Children's theory of mind will still continue to develop after the age of five and starts to predict different notions on how one person thinks or feels about the emotions of another person. The children will also start to develop the figurative languages and complex implications such as sarcasm and lies; all these lies in the theory of mind (Wellman H. M., 1992). For the case of a child diagnosed with ASD, it will be difficult for them to learn and exemplify the understanding of people's emotions and feelings. The understanding of the complex figurative languages will differ from children suffering with Autism Spectrum Disorder in that some might be trained and get to learn in the end while for others it might take eternity for them to understand and embrace the training (Miller, 2012). The theory of mind is a continuous process where one can continue learning and understand various individual's behaviors.

The theory of mind is said to have played key roles in understanding the developmental delays among the children, youth and the adults. By having a clear understanding of theory of mind, it is evident that one can be in a position to establish the children with delays and create interventions that would encourage and offer support to the developmental progress (Bright Futures Steering Committee, 2006). The false-belief understanding component is attached to the independent of a child's language age and capacity which are merged into various aspects that relate to their social functioning. Children with delayed theory of mind lack the ability to handle conflicts and maintain great intimacy with their friends. On the other hand, children who have a clear understanding on false beliefs are viewed to be highly advanced in their social development (Baio, 2014). Having a clear

understanding and developing clear knowledge about emotions and beliefs of others play a key role in developing the social competency among the children at their tender age up to maturity. Children who are diagnosed with autism lack the components of theory of mind resulting to developmental delays hence their social developments are compromised.

The executive function skills; for instance, shifting and cognitive flexibility are key components to the theory of mind. Children who are viewed to have relatively higher executive skills are able to maneuver with a number of perspectives and be able to switch between those particular perspectives. These perspectives are vital in assisting the individuals to distinguish between the issued reality and the ultimate beliefs of the other person (Bryce, 2015). The component EF skill is closely associated to social competence that an individual exemplifies, if there is a significant low level of EF skills, then the individuals are said to have relatively lower level of social competence which results to autism.

The theory of mind plays a crucial role in the development of a child. The social skills that children need to become conversant with are difficult to teach and instill to the children at their tender age, therefore, more and more education need to be conducted regarding the developmental skills and stages (Bryce, 2015). For a child to be diagnosed with autism, their developmental and social skills are tested first. If the social skills deviate from their counterparts, then it is concluded that the child is possibly suffering from Autism Spectrum Disorder. The ability to formulate the theory of mind in children is an important factor that makes the human beings social factors and be in a position to function healthily with other human

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beings. For children with ASD for that matter, they are attached to developing credible speeches and communication skills (Kimbi, 2014). They are in most cases unable to develop empathy and unable to engage in games with other children. The social skills for the children suffering with autism remain dormant throughout their lives; therefore, it is easier to notice these individuals once reflecting to their social life and communication. They are mostly detached from other members of the society.

A number of studies have alluded that some of the brains are not fully utilized by those suffering with Autism Spectrum Disorder hence making it difficult for these individuals to effectively form theory of mind. The relationship between the theory of mind and the autism spectrum disorder has not achieved any workable solution towards the disorder; however, the theory of mind has offered an avenue for great investigation towards the causes and the mechanisms behind Autism (Bright Futures Steering Committee, 2006). When a clear picture is created by linking between the theory of mind and autism spectrum disorder, it will be easier to establish how the theory of mind varies in the children who are diagnosed with autism. The use of applied behavior analysis (ABA) will play key role in training the children with autism. The ABA therapy has being used in most states to improve the social skills and behaviors among the children and individuals who are diagnosed with autism (Du, 2015). However, most of the individuals suffering from ASD may not be in a position to fully embrace the ABA training due to their prevailed inability to construct the theory of mind. Based on this aspect, these individuals may learn to execute similar tasks

and behaviors that are just as appropriate and effective as the process behind the theory of mind which is dominant in the neuro-typical persons.

### Problems with theory of mind

It is evident that not all children that can effectively develop the theory of mind at their tender age. The problem therefore might result to Autism Spectrum Disorder where the child will tend to become socially unstable. Additionally, the children tend to have difficulties in understanding why individuals do and say the things they say, make friends, and engage with others in playing (Ruffman, 2003). The children who experience difficulties in developing the theory of mind will develop complications such as ASD and having difficulties in developing social communication skills. The children diagnosed with ASD need to undergo treatment which will help them develop theory of mind in the end (Du, 2015). The children with Autism Spectrum Disorder tend to develop the theory of mind skills in different stages as compared to their counterparts. The absolute understanding of their ultimate and hidden feelings emerges first before the actual understanding of false beliefs.

According to (Ruffman, 2003) it is evident that children learn from what they see and hear from their parents. Children with autism might find it difficult to embrace and learn from what their parents do. Their developmental skills take relatively longer to show up as compared to other normal children; therefore, it is a collective responsibility for the parents to help the children with autism spectrum disorder to tune in and develop their theory of mind. When parents use feelings and expressions when they talk, this will help a



child in the development of theory of mind. For instance, when a mother shouts at the child because the child has done a wrong, then that will be ring in the mind of the child that the mother is angry and disappointed; this will be effective in the development of theory of mind of the child (Miller, 2012). Therefore, the child will take caution not to repeat the same act in the near future. For the children suffering with autism spectrum disorder, the case is different because they might not be in a position to read the expressions; they may rather perceive that things are normal.

There are a number of things that can be done to promote and improve the child's theory of mind particularly for the children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. Following the child's lead is one of the way to which the child's theory of mind can be boosted. This involves paying close attention to the things that the child is interested with so as to ensure that their theory of mind is developed. When one tends to force a child to follow and play with the things that the child is not interested with, the child might be slow in developing the theory of mind (Wellman H. M., 2004). Developing interest differs between the children with autism and their counterparts; this is evident since most of the children suffering from this disorder do not develop their interest at their early stages or even at their adult stage.

When a child with autism spectrum disorder is trained to adapt and develop interest, their theory of mind will develop significantly. By so doing, they will learn how to interact with others, play, and be able to predict other people's feelings and emotions (Kimbi, 2014). In most cases, children with autism are unable to develop the aspect of interacting with others; therefore there is need that their parents and guardians to play part in ensuring that the

children are tuned into becoming social and interact with others, develop the aspect of feeling and emotions. The theory of mind differs significantly in the children with autism spectrum disorder in that some of them are absolutely unsocial while others are partially social; in that, they sometime become social while the next minute they are not social at all, they separate themselves from others.

The development of the theory of mind is entirely dependent based on the maturation of numerous brain systems. It is also shaped by various factors that affect a child for instance; the mode of parenting offered to the child, the social relations that exist in the child's society, the training offered, and the education process that the child is posted to in the society (Peterson, 2012). A child with Autism Spectrum Disorder is perceived to have delayed development of the theory of mind due to the limiting factors exposed to him or the delayed development of the brain systems. The brain systems are attached to the child's wellness and the ability to distinguish and establish another person's feelings and emotions (Kimbi, 2014). When a child is able to establish the emotions exemplified by the other person, then the child is regarded to as being socially healthy. The components of the theory of mind in children diagnosed with autism holds that the child tends to have rare interactions which is said to take place between the development of the brain and the social environment they are exposed to.

The mindreading component is regarded to as the subcomponent that prevails in the theory of mind. The skill allows the child to manage their social communication between the human and the nonhuman components. This component holds that various individuals have a diverse mental states

which include the beliefs, intuitions, and emotions which might differ from our own perception (Colle, 2019). The impairment of the theory of mind is in most cases viewed among the children suffering from autism spectrum disorder. The children suffering with autism spectrum disorder are in most cases unable to express their level of intelligence and other cognitive abilities (Kimbi, 2014). Nevertheless, the theory of mind is said to realize its full development in human beings only.

The theory of mind is a complex and difficult component to understand and differentiate in children with or without autism. The component takes distinct variation between the child with autism and those that do not have the ASD; this means that it can only be understood when a thorough explanation and practical is conducted (Wellman, 2004). People might choose to reflect on other aspects based on their social knowledge on how other people behave and operate; but do not rely on how other people perceive that particular notion based on their social behaviors and environment.

Logical reasoning is another component of the theory of mind. This holds that what actually happens is the breakdown of particular abilities while trying to take into accounts other people's beliefs and interpretation of their ultimate actions (Westby, 2014). The component of logical reasoning in the theory of mind seems to be partially impaired to individuals suffering from autism spectrum disorder. When a child is unable to make inferences and make accurate decisions regarding how other people feel, therefore, it can be concluded that the child is suffering from autism (Miller, 2012). The treatment can be administered to the child through training and restoring their social ties.

In conclusion, the theory of mind is imperative in the social development of any child. When a child is unable to articulate the theory of mind and other social skills, the child is termed as to have suffered with autism spectrum disorder. Children with autism are said to poor social skills; hence do not associate well with others in the society. Therefore, the theory of mind will help in establishing these children and train them on the basic functions in order for them to interact healthily with others. Despite the fact that the social skills are difficult to administer to the children especially those suffering from delayed development skills, it is possible if the parents and guardians can comprehend the mechanism which underlies behind the social competence. If they clearly understand this mechanism, there is a higher likelihood that the executive functioning and the theory of mind will help the children in meeting their social expectations which they face on daily basis. Additionally, the theory of mind will ensure that the child has become aware of the social skills around them and hence becoming self-aware in the end.

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