Book Review


Scholarly thinkers and philosophers have long been fascinated by the idea of one’s access to self (‘Know thyself’) and to the mind more generally. In literary works, too, reasoning about the mind has often occupied centre stage—one only has to think of Hamlet’s introspective soliloquies or Elizabeth Bennett’s changing impressions of Mr Darcy in Pride and Prejudice. These diverse endeavours may be inspired by a fundamental truth about our social understanding: in the way that it underpins everyday social interaction, the mind forms a bridge between self and other.

In the 20th century, sociologists and social psychologists drew heavily on this basic assumption. In Cooley’s (1902) famous account of the ‘looking-glass self’, he stated that ‘the social reference takes the form of a somewhat definite imagination of how one’s self—that is any idea he appropriates—appears in a particular mind’ (p. 183). This characterization includes the intuitively obvious but nevertheless crucial point that we attribute certain thoughts and beliefs (in this case, concerning the self) to others’ minds. Since then, social psychologists have gone on to explore in great detail the ways in which we reason and form impressions about other people and their minds.

Against this backdrop, the story of psychological research on the development of social understanding is an intriguing one. Piaget is famous for, among other contributions, his depiction of developmental changes in children’s ability to adopt others’ perspectives. Building on his insights, researchers in the late 1960s and 1970s were beginning to address changes in children’s ‘social role-taking’, such as their ability to ‘discount their own understanding of the test situations and adopt the roles of persons less well informed than themselves’ (Chandler, Greenspan, & Barenboim, 1974, p. 548). Selman (1980) went on to create an elaborate stage model to capture and explain developmental progress in children’s understanding of others’ perspectives. In the years that followed, the work on children’s growing sophistication in social role-taking was overtaken by a somewhat narrower focus on a ‘watershed’ in children’s theory of mind, particularly as captured in young children’s ability to pass the now-famous false-belief task. The scale of research activity devoted to this topic is impressive, and its important contributions to knowledge have been reviewed in numerous existing volumes. But, looking at some of this research, one might easily fall into the trap of describing children’s social understanding—rather ironically—as if it were an intrapsychological phenomenon.

Fortunately, a great deal of recent research has redressed the balance by highlighting the fundamental connections between self and other in the development of children’s social cognition. The pressing need to integrate the many insights from the last three decades of work is the starting point for Hughes’s engaging, lucid and authoritative book, which firmly situates children’s social understanding within their social lives. What makes this book such important reading—not just for academics and students working in this area but also for professionals in education and health—is not simply Hughes’s skilful
ability to weave together the key themes emerging from a large, and rapidly growing, literature with the delightfully accessible findings of her own very substantial research programme. More than that, Hughes accomplishes the crucial task of setting a clear agenda for future work that builds on all of this progress.

Hughes’s comprehensive exposition addresses many lines of complex research activity and does so in a remarkably clear and conceptually elegant manner. The book is divided into three main parts: (i) examining the cognitive factors (particularly executive function and language) involved in social understanding; (ii) elucidating the way in which social understanding is influenced by children’s social relationships and interactions; and (iii) tackling the socio-behavioural and emotional sequelae of social understanding. Throughout, Hughes references her own groundbreaking Toddlers Up study, which has followed families and children from the age of 2 years through their time at primary school, using an innovative combination of observational methods and standardized tasks and rating systems. Particularly helpful is the opportunity afforded to the reader to see the many important findings from this research programme illustrated in rich detail through touching and humorous excerpts from transcripts of children’s video-recorded social interactions.

Among the many contributions of this book are research-based insights into (i) the complex ways in which cognitive achievements facilitate the transition from an intuitive social understanding (shown in infants’ implicit responsiveness to others’ minds) to a reflective social understanding (shown in older children’s conceptual reasoning about mental states); (ii) the roles played by social relationships and interactions with parents, siblings and friends in the child’s growing insight into mind; and (iii) the ‘neutral’ consequences of social understanding for children’s everyday social and emotional lives, which can take both positive (e.g. cooperative) and negative (e.g. bullying) forms according to a range of moderating dimensions (e.g. age, verbal ability, gender, SES, culture) and mediating factors (e.g. quantity and quality of different social relationships).

Crucially, rather than trying to work towards a simple explanation of the antecedents and outcomes of social understanding, Hughes takes a nuanced approach, recognizing the interplay between a multitude of factors that influence the developmental trajectory of any given individual child. This is nowhere more apparent than in Hughes’s analysis of continuities between social understanding in different social contexts (in the family, with peers, at school, etc.). Empirical research that follows children longitudinally across different contexts is rare, and the Toddlers Up study makes the most of a valuable opportunity to study (with the help of very revealing conceptual and statistical models) the lives of a socioeconomically diverse sample of children and families in a remarkably rich and detailed way.

As mentioned above, Hughes’s work is especially exciting in the way that it sets a foundation for future research. By drawing together work on cognition, emotion, relationships and social context, the book challenges us to capture the development of social understanding within the everyday drama of children’s social lives. At the end of the concluding chapter, Hughes recommends two particular directions of work: the implications of research in this area for the educational context and the role of social group norms and cultural systems in children’s social–cognitive development. In fact, these important suggestions can be elaborated in interrelated ways that extend the reach of Hughes’s insightful analysis.

In one section of Hughes’s concluding chapter, she asks if it is possible ‘to design curriculum innovations that stimulate reflection on mental states’ (p. 181). This idea maps onto a rapidly mounting body of work on school-based
strategies to foster ‘social and emotional learning’ (see Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011, for a recent meta-analysis), as well as a whole pedagogical domain of classroom activity revolving around the concept of ‘dialogic’ teaching and learning (see Mercer & Littleton, 2007). But, we must take heed of Hughes’s comment that social understanding cannot simply be taught in the way that a school subject can. Rather, we now need to meet the challenge of translating what we know about the early social experiences that influence children’s reasoning about mind into effective educational practices that support children’s continued growth in social understanding.

This brings us to a further crucial point, namely that social understanding continues to develop past the initial transition to school, through middle childhood and on into adolescence. Hughes already traces some of the exciting efforts in the literature to tackle these advances and particularly emphasizes the need to address ‘not just a mentalistic understanding of belief and desire, but also a deontic understanding of social rules’ (p. 182). In fact, there is emerging evidence that the deontic and mentalistic aspects of social understanding are closely interrelated: violations of social conventions have been found to trigger children’s mentalistic reasoning about others’ evaluations of the self (see Banerjee, Bennett, & Luke, ). More generally, the social processes that operate in the peer group interactions of everyday school life are rooted in complex transactions between many different minds, each with its own social–experiential history. And this of course is one of the reasons why our efforts to understand and intervene in children’s social difficulties—from severe autistic impairments through to instances of peer aggression or withdrawal—are becoming increasingly tied up with the kind of integrative agenda that Hughes presents in her book.

In sum, Hughes’s book provides a valuable foundation for research and practice by capturing and drawing together the key insights from—and implications of—many different lines of work on children’s social understanding. By taking the very best from the advances in ‘theory of mind’ research, and reinstating social–relational factors to the central position they need to occupy in our conceptual models, Hughes puts us all in a good position to maximize the strength and applied value of work on children’s social–cognitive development.

REFERENCES


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DOI: 10.1002/icd.760