

The Theory of Mind and the Sally-Anne study.

Theory of Mind

Theory of Mind (ToM) was first coined by Premack & Woodruff (1978) as the cognitive capability of understanding another's mind. It is the ability to put yourself in someone else's shoes, understand that they may be thinking or feeling different to you. This is an essential skill for empathy and success in social interactions.

Theory of Mind plays a crucial role in social cognition and is important for understanding and predicting others' behaviour. It typically occurs during early childhood (believed to develop at around 4 years of age) and continues to develop throughout adolescence and adulthood.

Smith (1999) suggests children develop a Theory of Mind in the following order; understanding wanting, understanding thinking and understanding that seeing leads to knowing. Smith also argued that understanding 'false beliefs' and 'hidden feelings' demonstrate the development of a theory of mind.

According to Smith (1999) understanding hidden feelings is the idea that people can display different emotions to those they are really feeling. Whereas, understanding false beliefs is an idea that sometimes people believe things that are not true, and may act according to their beliefs, not as to what is really true.

The Theory of Mind (ToM) is often tested using the false belief method. A child is shown a scenario and asked to interpret it from the viewpoint of one of the characters. If they can do this, they have a developed ToM.

Simon Baron-Cohen is by far the biggest contributor to our knowledge of ToM. However, most of the information he has collected has been from his work on children with autism.

In a study aimed to test the ToM, Baron-Cohen et al (1985) asked children to watch as two dolls (Sally and Anne) act out a scenario.

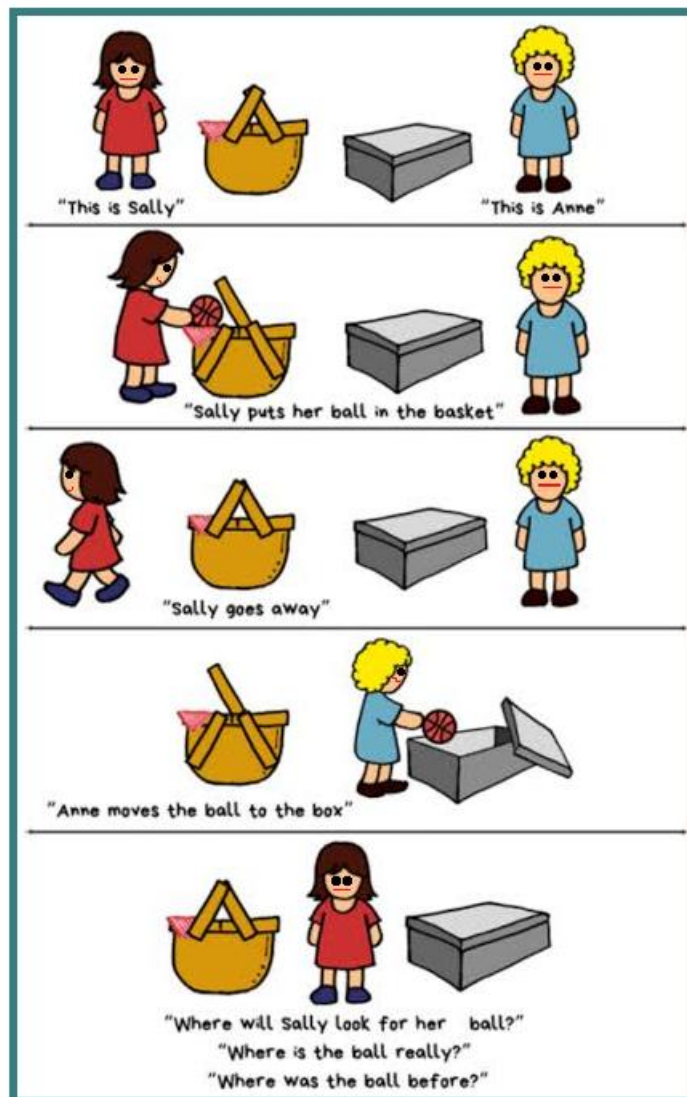
Sally-Anne Study

Baron-Cohen et al (1985) studied the responses to the Sally Anne task by comparing autistic children with two other groups (Down's syndrome and Normal). He asked them a question to check their understanding of the dolls names before checking their memory. He measured their responses to a belief question in the scenario, which required them to see things from the dolls perspective.

They found that autistic children struggled the most with the 'belief' question and could not place themselves in the scenario to see things from the dolls perspective. Yet, 85% of the children in the two control groups correctly identified where Sally would look for her marble, compared to only 20% of the autistic children.

Baron-Cohen et al (1985) suggested that even though the mental age of the autistic children in the experiment was higher than that of the controls, they alone failed to impute beliefs to others. They argued that children with autism seem unable to appreciate that others have different thoughts or beliefs to themselves.

Autism is a developmental disorder characterised by an inability to socially interact with others. Studies have shown that children with autism lack a theory of mind, which restricts them from interacting emotionally with others. However, not all children with autism lack a theory of mind. It is also possible to develop a child's theory of mind through play therapy and guided tuition.



In the experiments testing ToM there could be issues with understanding, as young children may not comprehend the questions, or equally so may want to please the research so show demand characteristics.

