



# Children's interpretive theory of mind: The role of mothers' personal epistemologies and mother-child talk about interpretation



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## ABSTRACT

We investigated the relations between mothers' conceptions of knowledge (i.e., personal epistemologies; PEs), mother-child talk about interpretation, and the development of 6- to 8-year-old children's interpretive theory of mind (IToM). Mothers with complex PEs attempted to elicit more talk about interpretation and had children who produced more of such talk than mothers with simpler PEs. Additionally, the complexity of mothers' PEs and the frequency of mother-child talk about interpretation were both positively correlated with children's IToM. When family income and child age were considered, mothers' PEs positively predicted children's IToM, whereas mother-child interpretive talk did not. Furthermore, the relationship between mothers' PEs and children's IToM was strongest for those dyads that engaged in lesser amounts of interpretive talk. These results suggest that mothers' PEs are important for understanding children's social-cognitive development and that the conversational context provides a setting in which talk about important psychological phenomena facilitates children's growing understanding of knowledge.

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## 1. Introduction

The ability to understand that two people might interpret the exact same event in different, yet equally plausible, ways is a foundational milestone in children's social-cognitive development. Although children come to understand that individuals can hold *false* beliefs about an object or an event by 4 or 5 years (see Wellman, Cross, & Watson, 2001), they do not seem to understand that individuals actively interpret and construct their own beliefs about an event, and that each of these interpretations can potentially be a *true* belief, until about 6 or 7 years (Carpendale & Chandler, 1996; Lagattuta, Sayfan, & Blattman, 2010; Pillow & Weed, 1995). In the developmental literature, this capacity has been referred to as "interpretive theory of mind" (IToM; Carpendale & Chandler, 1996) and has been related to other higher-order cognitive abilities such as understanding white lies (Hsu & Cheung, 2013) and understanding and communicating about the meanings of symbols (Myers & Liben, 2012). The purpose of the present study is to identify factors in children's social environments, particularly parent-child dialogue and characteristics of caregivers, which might contribute to the acquisition of IToM.

Although the role of social factors in false belief understanding has been well documented (see Carpendale & Lewis, 2006), there is little research linking children's social environment to IToM. In particular, it has been noted in the false belief literature that the content of discourse between a caregiver and a child can have substantial influence on children's subsequent

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social cognition (e.g., Dunn, Brown, & Beardsall, 1991; Turnbull, Carpendale, & Racine, 2008; Turnbull, Carpendale, & Racine, 2009). We adopt a perspective shared by a number of relational-systems theories of development, such as developmental systems theory, action-based approaches, embodied cognition approaches, and relational/constructivist accounts (e.g., Allen & Bickhard, 2013; Carpendale & Lewis, 2010; Oyama, 2000; Vygotsky, 1986). Although each of these perspectives differs in some respects, they share a common view that social understanding emerges through engagement in social routines and practices. From a relational-systems perspective, children's understanding of interpretation develops through exposure to conversation about the subjectivity of knowledge. Opportunities for engaging in discourse about interpretation allow children to not only be familiarized with various uses of the relevant concepts, but to also practice and develop their own understanding of subjective truths. We further take the perspective that the content of discourse between a caregiver and child will depend on the caregiver's prior beliefs. Indeed, research has shown that parental belief systems are related to parenting styles and the quality of interaction with children (see Sigel, McGillicuddy-De Lisi, & Goodnow, 1992). Given that children's interpretation understanding is related to their understanding of the subjectivity of knowledge, parents' own beliefs about the nature of knowledge should play an important role in how mother-child talk facilitates children's IToM development.

Accordingly, in this paper, we investigate the role of mother-child talk about the interpretive features of knowledge in facilitating IToM. Of particular interest are mothers' own conceptions about the nature of knowledge and knowing (i.e., their personal epistemologies; PEs) as such conceptions might influence interpretive talk between a mother and a child. Specifically, we hypothesized that mothers with more complex beliefs about knowledge (i.e., mothers who acknowledge the subjective and constructive nature of knowledge) should engage in more talk about interpretation with their children than mothers with simpler beliefs about knowledge (i.e., mothers with either/or views on knowledge). We further hypothesized that PEs and interpretive talk, and the interaction between these two factors, should predict children's IToM. We also included a number of social and linguistic measures related to false belief understanding both as control, and potentially contributing, variables.

### 1.1. Mother-child interpretive talk and theory of mind

In everyday interactions, when we make a judgment about a person's interpretation of some state of affairs, we refer to that person's actions, including their ideas and beliefs. It is these forms of "social evidence" upon which we all rely when making a judgment about others' interpretations and understanding. As such, in order to demonstrate social understanding, a developing child must also have to learn to make such judgments correctly; in other words, to have social understanding is, in part, to have mastered such practices. This involves a mastery of the circumstances in which such "interpretation talk" is justified. Although, to our knowledge, no past research has looked at the relations between caregiver-child interpretive talk and IToM, a large body of research has looked at the relations between mother-child talk, uses of mental state terms, and other aspects of social-cognitive development. For example, Dunn et al. (1991) looked at the frequency with which parents used feeling state terms when speaking with their 36-month-old children. When the same children were 6 years of age, they tested their understanding of emotions with a perspective-taking task. The results showed that parents who more frequently used feeling state terms had children who scored higher on the social-cognitive task later on. Similar results have also been revealed when looking at parent-child talk at different ages and false belief understanding (e.g., Ruffman, Slade, & Crowe, 2002), and some research has also compared children's uses of mental state terms when speaking with friends and siblings versus mothers as a means of explicating its broader social implications (Brown, Donelan-McCall, & Dunn, 1996).

The study of mental state terms has revealed an important relationship between the use of such words and social-cognitive development. Turnbull et al. (2008, 2009) have added to this research area by showing that words that do not appear to fall into the category of mental state references can sometimes convey meaningful information about the mind. For example, in attempting to elicit talk about a character's interpretation of an event in a story, a mother might ask her child "what did each character say after watching this event?" No specified mental state terms are used in this phrase; however, it still has the potential to elicit talk about the interpretive features of a story. Indeed, Sabbagh and Callanan (1998) studied parent-child conversation by focusing on children's uses of statements that contrast two different perspectives without direct reference to mental state terms. They found that parents often responded to their children with mentalistic talk about multiple perspectives, even when children did not explicitly use mental state terms in their contrastive. Furthermore, Turnbull et al. (2008) found that mothers' use of elaborative talk, in which elements of a picture book regarding false belief understanding were discussed, predicted children's false belief understanding above and beyond mothers' use of mental state terms. Taken together, these findings suggest that the significance of mental state terms in social-cognitive development might depend on their conversational use. It may not be the use of mental state terms alone that influences children's understanding of psychological phenomena, but rather more general talk about such phenomena that teaches children to understand their use. Thus, rather than solely examining uses of mental state terms, we focus on important elements of mother-child talk that pertain to the interpretive features of knowledge.

### 1.2. Personal epistemology and parenting

In emphasizing the role of conversation in mother-child interaction, it is important to consider what types of factors might influence individual differences in interpretive talk. Researchers have begun to explore the relations between mothers' PEs

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