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## How social status influences our understanding of others' mental states

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### ABSTRACT

The current study investigated whether children's relative social status within a context influences their ability to identify others' mental states. Across two experiments, 3- to 7-year-olds ( $N = 103$ ) were randomly assigned to hold either an advantaged or disadvantaged social status and were assessed on their ability to accurately identify others' mental states (via false-belief and belief-emotion "theory of mind" assessments). When participants' status was manipulated by a structural factor (gender; Experiment 1), participants with disadvantaged status were more likely than participants with advantaged status to pass the false-belief and belief-emotion assessments. When status was manipulated by an individual factor (performance; Experiment 2), participants with disadvantaged status were more likely to pass the false-belief assessment but not the belief-emotion assessment. Results provide the first empirical evidence that an individual's contextualized perspective (i.e., his or her social status situated within a given context) influences the individual's ability to identify others' mental states.

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### Introduction

Understanding others' mental states—their desires, beliefs, emotions, and intentions—is at the crux of nearly all social interactions (Tomasello, 2016; Wellman, 2014; Woodward, 2009). For example,

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understanding others' intentions allows individuals to interpret their actions, and anticipating how others will feel is critical to guiding one's own actions and ensuring the fair treatment of others (Killen, Mulvey, Richardson, Jampol, & Woodward, 2011; Smetana, Jambon, Conry-Murray, & Sturge-Apple, 2012; Sodian et al., 2016). Furthermore, mental state knowledge is an important evolutionary milestone that distinguishes humans from nonhuman primates (Tomasello, 2014).

Ontogenetically, children's ability to explicitly recognize that others have an internal representation of the world based on their unique perspective, referred to as "theory of mind" (ToM) competence (Wellman, Cross, & Watson, 2001), constitutes an important developmental achievement. Children's ToM competence is related to numerous social and behavioral competencies, including social competence (Dunn, Cutting, & Demetriou, 2000; Peterson & Siegal, 2002), intergroup attitudes (Chalik, Rivera, & Rhodes, 2014; McLoughlin & Over, 2017), and evaluations of morally relevant contexts (Killen et al., 2011; Li, Rizzo, Burkholder, & Killen, 2017). Children's ToM capacities are also linked to their ability to resist harmful intergroup stereotypes (Mulvey, Rizzo, & Killen, 2015; Rizzo & Killen, 2017).

Implicit in much of this research, however, is the assumption that children's mental state understanding is a relatively stable fixed trait; children are either able to internally represent others' desires, beliefs, or emotions or they are not. Comparatively little research has examined intra-individual differences in children's performance on mental state assessments (Baker, Leslie, Gallistel, & Hood, 2016). Yet, broad conceptual changes in individuals' thinking—as occurs when children develop a representational understanding of others' minds (Rhodes & Wellman, 2013; Wellman et al., 2001)—occur over an extended period of time rather than as a sudden and consistent mastery (Baker et al., 2016; Siegler, 2006, 2007). That is, a child may have acquired the underlying *competence* to recognize the representational nature of others' mental states but may still fail to *apply* that competence to a specific context, especially when the competence is first emerging, due to the complexity of multiple factors co-occurring in most social contexts. When contextual factors impinge on children's ability to attend to the relevant information, this makes the application more difficult. Furthermore, the ability to *apply* cognitive competencies to actual situations may require more effortful control and attentional resources when a competence is first emerging compared with when it is already deeply entrenched and routine.

No study to our knowledge has directly examined how children's contextual perspective—their immediate position or status situated within a social context—influences their understanding of the mental states of those around them. Thus, the current research investigated this novel question at an age when children's ability to represent others' mental states is just emerging.

### *Influence of status on mental state understanding*

One factor that may influence children's proclivity to think about others in terms of their mental states is children's relative social status. For instance, Kraus, Piff, Mendoza-Denton, Rheinschmidt, and Keltner (2012) suggested that, for adults, lower socioeconomic status (e.g., as determined by income, wealth, or education) spurs contextualist social cognitive tendencies—a system of knowledge that focuses on forces outside an individual's control, including contextual factors and others' beliefs, intentions, and emotions. By contrast, they stated that higher societal social status may spur solipsistic social cognitive tendencies—a system of knowledge that focuses on forces within an individual's control, including one's own traits, goals, beliefs, and emotions, and prioritizes one's own mental states over those of others. Supporting this proposition, Kraus, Côté, and Keltner (2010) documented that adults of a lower social status were more accurate in identifying emotions depicted in pictures than were adults of a higher social class. No study to date, however, has investigated the role that social status plays in ToM competence during childhood.

Accordingly, it remains unknown whether these "cognitive tendencies" are a result of prolonged experience with advantaged or disadvantaged social status or whether they can be attributed to a more immediate influence of an individual's contextualized perspective (i.e., whether they hold an advantaged or disadvantaged status within a given context). The former suggests that individuals' developing ToM *competence* is influenced by their broader developmental context (i.e., ToM competence is influenced by one's accumulated experiences with advantaged and disadvantaged status).

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