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Commentary

What are the relations of thinking about groups and theory of mind?

Hannes Rakoczy*

Institute of Psychology & Courant Research Centre 'Evolution of Social Behaviour', University of Göttingen, Germany

The paper by Abrams *et al.* (2014) reports an interesting study on the connection between children's judgements about social group relations and their theory of mind (ToM). The key finding is that advanced ToM, the capacity to ascribe second-order mental states ('she believes that he believes that p'), was systematically related to how children thought about the relation between being perceived as typical in a group and being accepted by the group members: children with higher advanced ToM assumed a closer relation such that the more typical other group members take an individual to be, the more they accept and include her in the group.

This finding is very interesting in itself. But this line of research is important and promising in the broader context of the study of social-cognitive development more generally. In this broader context, it turns out that research on children's social-cognitive development is surprisingly fragmented, with different research traditions targeting different kinds of phenomena with little systematic interconnection. Dramatic examples include the study of children's group cognition, on the one hand, and the study of ToM, on the other hand. Much recent research has investigated the ontogenetic origins of in-/outgroup cognition from infancy on (e.g., Kinzler, Dupoux, & Spelke, 2007; Powell & Spelke, 2013). And of course, ToM has been one of the most fruitful areas of investigation in early cognitive development over the last three decades.

Form the first line of research, we have learned that a tendency to distinguish between in- and outgroup members, for example with regard to native language, develops very early in human ontogeny and that the distinction between in- and outgroup members usually goes along with a preference to interact and affiliate with and to learn from for the former (e.g., (Buttelmann, Zmyj, Daum, & Carpenter, 2013; Kinzler, Corriveau, & Harris, 2011; Kinzler *et al.*, 2007). But so far there has been virtually no investigation of how this precocious group cognition is related to ToM, that is, the capacity to ascribe mental states to individuals from within or without a given group. Intuitively, one might expect that the general tribalist preference for dealing with those from one's own group goes along with a similar asymmetry in interpersonal understanding and interpretation regarding in- versus

*Correspondence should be addressed to Hannes Rakoczy, Institute of Psychology & Courant Research Centre 'Evolution of Social Behaviour', University of Göttingen, Waldweg 26, D-37073 Göttingen, Germany (email: hannes.rakoczy@psych.uni-goettingen.de).

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outgroup members (such that one understands the former better than the latter). However, the opposite seems to be true, at least under certain conditions: recent research in adult social psychology suggests that adult subjects are actually more accurate at taking the perspective of outgroup members than that of in-group member (Todd, Hanko, Galinsky, & Mussweiler, 2011). Why might this be so? Does this speak in favour of the old Machiavellian idea about the origins of ToM (such that ToM arose as social-cognitive device for competition and manipulation rather than for understanding and cooperation)? Or does it merely reflect the fact that perceived difference facilitates the detection of further differences, for example, in perspectives (which is exactly what is required in standard ToM tasks)? And how can these findings be made compatible with the widely documented in-group preferences mentioned above?

What these questions clearly point to is the need for a more systematic research programme on the relation of social cognition in the sense of thinking about individuals as members of certain social groups, on the one hand, and social cognition in the sense of ascribing subjective mental states to these individuals (ToM), on the other hand. The line of research to which the present paper belongs, investigating one such link between the two forms of social cognition (in which respects some forms of ToM might be prerequisites for complex group thinking) could be one of the many starting points for such a bigger project.

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