Discussion Questions

1. Cutting and Dunn (2002) found that 5-year olds' perspective-taking abilities predicted an increased sensitivity to teacher's criticism based on a minor error. These findings made me curious about the ways social-cognitive skills may make children more vulnerable to negative feedback from others. I wonder if there is a negative side to having great perspective-taking abilities in early development.

2. Throughout the reading, the author discusses a number of studies which indicate that there is a dissociation between the ability to make mental state inferences about goals, on the one hand, and the ability to make inferences about beliefs, on the other hand. Research suggests that primates, young children, autistic children, and deaf children (born into a non-signing family), are all able to make inferences about mental states involving goals; however, they all show a difficulty in making mental state attributions about beliefs. I am very curious to investigate the neural underpinning of these abilities. If mental state attributions about goals are processed through a different neural circuit than mental state attributions about beliefs, then we have more evidence to believe that these two sets of skills are different.

3. Teasing is discussed very little, but it seems to be part of normal development. Is teasing functional or just a byproduct of cognitive development (i.e. kids are mean because they don't understand the impact yet)? or both?

4. Where do we draw the line between saying that a child has some sort of knowledge about the world vs. there are just things that they are used to and anything else surprises them?

5. How is empathy and helping extended to in vs. outgroups. Under which circumstances does ingroup preference translate to less helping towards outgroup in young children?

6. pg. 817-818, offers a couple alternative explanations for why babies go over the cliff when their mothers look happy and why they don't when their mothers look fearful. I'm confused about the explanation that suggests babies aren't gathering specific info about the situation from their mom's expression, but rather babies adopt the mood that's in line with mom's facial expression, and that mood shift causes the subsequent behaviours. Specifically, there's one sentence I don't understand: "On this account, the mother’s emotional signal would not produce a broad shift toward either exploration or wariness; rather, it would produce a narrow shift in the infant’s emotional stance toward a particular object." I *think* this sentence is trying to say what I just described, but the ideas of broad and narrow emotional shifts are confusing me. Why is getting specific information about a situation more "broad" than a mood shift? Feels like it should be the other way around. I'm sure this is a small point but it makes me feel like I'm misunderstanding something.
7. pg 834-836. The section on doubt and uncertainty doesn't feel like it's about social cognition to me, it seems like it's about reasoning in general. I get how kids might have trouble appreciating that some pieces of information may be ambiguous, but that seems like an issue of inflexible reasoning, which could be completely independent of anyone else's opinion. In other words, to me the ability to find two solutions seems indicative of flexible reasoning, and doesn't necessarily imply perspective taking. However, appreciating that different people may have different opinions about things, I see how that falls into the realm of social cognition. But to understand the possibility of having multiple answers to a question doesn't seem to necessarily require theory of mind. Again, maybe I'm misunderstanding something?

8. What potential reasons could explain why children are capable of understanding that people have false beliefs and yet, will believe that a person will act on an true belief (even if they are not aware of it).

Eg. child will say that Sally thinks the ball is where she left it (eg. basket), but proceeds to say that Sally will look in the location that the child saw the ball physically moved to (eg. closet)

9. For children that fail Theory of Mind Tasks, are children cognitively unable to displace information they have gained during the task? (eg. they physically see a ball moved to another location, or know that the wolf has taken over the body of Little Red Riding Hood’s grandmother) Is this related to the Curse of Knowledge?

10. What are the most compelling reasons for why Theory of Mind has evolved? eg. outsmart others, deception?

pg. 840 Chimpanzees performed better in food-finding challenge in competitive vs. cooperative situations. Do competitive situations “force” one to perceive another’s goals, beliefs, desires etc., or is it confounded with egocentric motivations? (eg. finding food for oneself)

11. Would first hand experience with tasks designed to study belief based emotion enhance young children’s ability to generalize and understand that individual desires and beliefs have the potential to modulate a person’s reactions to a particular situation? (eg. Person approaches candy wrapper (emotion= happy) but after unwrapping it, discovers rocks (emotion becomes sadness/disappointment)

12. When do children, if they do so at all, learn to trust the adult who admits what they don’t yet know (instead of satisficing, rationalizing, or over-claiming)?

13. How much confidence do toddlers and preschoolers have in ideas about the minds of others when these ideas are driven by their own experience, what they been told, or what they have inferred (i.e. imagined)?
14. The idea of ToM as a unitary construct or a “module” seems a bit iffy to me. The research seems to indicate that it at the very least has a number of distinct components (e.g., understanding of beliefs, cognitions) that do not develop at the same time (developmentally). Furthermore, one component can be relatively intact while the other is delayed or deficient (e.g., in autism). Even chimpanzees can accomplish some tasks consistent with social cognition (e.g. understanding goals, comforting). So, though the different components seem to correlate, they don’t seem to necessarily hang together as a construct. So, does it make sense to put these varied and complex social cognitive abilities under the single label of ‘theory of mind’?

15. What are the limits of what can we learn from comparative psychology (across species?) I’m very interested in the extent to which social cognitive abilities are continuous across evolution, comparing across chimpanzees and humans. Comforting others – yes; seems as though there is evolutionary continuity. Cooperating seems to be a different story. Understanding false beliefs is discontinuous across evolution. Is there in fact a module that is unique to humans, and why should this be the case? Interesting to consider the evolutionary source of such abilities.

16. I find that there is a clash between certain empirical findings (e.g., the lack of preschoolers’ access to their own mental content) – with my own recollection. Makes me wonder the extent to which such findings (e.g., that preschoolers have difficulty describing their own mental content or understanding that others have rich internal experiences) are due to difficulty measuring such phenomena (e.g. asking the wrong questions). How much of my recollection is flawed and/or influenced by faulty lay psychology?

17. p814: If “first-person experience is a vital ingredient in the interpretation of others’ actions”, that suggests an embodied-cognition aspect of development, i.e. a necessary parallel between sensori-motor and cognitive development. (There is a “psycho-motor developmental psychotherapy” called Bodynamics which applies that theory, but it lacks systemic empirical support.) Has much work been done on developmental embodied cognition?

18. p815: The Baldwin et al. (2001) interrupted action video experiment suggests development of a "movement grammar", a parsing of action into episodes, phrases, cadences or rhythms. What do we know about cognition of episodic parsing?

19. p820: In studies of helping, have experimenters distinguished between the helper’s and actor’s model of intention? What happens when the intent of the actor is not what the helper assumes?
20. Overall: If understanding others’ beliefs depends on language and conversational experience, what does this say about adult variability in respecting other cultures or belief systems?

21. Compared with typically developing children, abused children tend to have more distressful experience. It should have been easier for them to understand, and show sympathy for people’s suffering. But in fact they respond callously to the distress of other children. Why? Do they suppress their empathy? Do they have abnormal perception of pain? Do they see distress as “commonplace”? Or do they just want to get revenge on some other people?

22. How do children develop an insight into their own mental processes? When do they start to reflect on, and even try to control their own goals, intentions, desires, beliefs, and memories? Is it part of metacognition? What is the relationship between this ability and theory of mind? Does it precede or parallel the development of theory of mind? Is theory of mind a general ability that applies to both others and people themselves?

23. From first-order belief to second-order belief, theory of mind continues to develop as children grow up. What are the building blocks of theory of mind? What accounts for this ongoing change? Is it the accumulation of first-person experience, in other words, children’s increasing understanding of their own goals, desires, and beliefs? Or is it the development of basic cognitive functions (e.g., executive control, inhibition, memory)?

24. Near the beginning of the article when Harris (2006) discusses habituation of infants in response to various stimuli manipulations, I began to wonder if habituation is necessarily an indication of boredom for infants? He cites an example of 9 to 12 month old infants who looked longer at and therefore presumably were surprised by the circuitous route compared to the direct route. However, infants here were first exposed to the indirect route and then they saw it again after the direct route, they looked longer at the indirect route. Could they be looking longer because they like repetition of something they have seen before? Is this looking time necessarily evidence of habituation?

25. There seems to be evidence that babies around the age of 14 to 15 months are sympathetic. When do infants begin to display empathy? Is it consistent from then on?

26. I have trouble understanding what is meant by toddlers are not yet “engaged in a sophisticated form of mind reading”. What does this mean? Do adults consistently have concern even?
27. When Beliefs is discussed, it is clear that children’s understanding of belief improves with age. Specifically, “At 30 months, children are more the 80% incorrect; at 44 months, they are 50% correct; and by 56 months, they are approximately 75% correct. Thus, children’s performance shifts from being systematically below chance (at 41 months and younger) to systematically above chance (at 48 months and older)” (p. 824). What is it that causes these changes? This is just one example, but in general something I struggle with coming from a cognitive background: what is it that causes these changes to occur? (e.g., school, socialization, age, etc.). There could be so many things causing increased performance on these specific tasks, but what is it really and how do we know for sure?

28. Question regarding Wellman & Bartsch (1988) - Why do children understand the indeterminate belief task, but not a false belief task? How is this related to the possibility of a "curse of knowledge?"

29. When does source-monitoring become fully developed? What is the cognitive mechanism behind children’s difficulty in remembering the source and time of learning?

30. When do children begin to understand lying? Do they view it as a wrongful action? How is this linked to other facets of theory of mind?