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Comparative Study

Theory of Mind: A Comparative Study Between Neurotypical, Autistic and Specific Learning Disability (SLD) Children (Ages 3-7)

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to investigate the Theory of Mind (TOM) capacities in children aged 3 to 7, comparing neurotypical development with that of children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD). TOM, the ability to understand and attribute mental states like beliefs and intentions to oneself and others self-desires and understanding false beliefs of others, emotional access and knowledge accessing ability plays a pivotal role in navigating social interactions and relationships, with its developmental trajectory largely established during early childhood. However, individuals with neurodevelopmental conditions, including ASD and SLD, may exhibit delays or impairments in TOM comprehension. Employing a comparative approach, this study aims to assess TOM performance across these three distinct groups of children. A sample from each group will undergo standardized TOM assessments to gauge their understanding. The study's objective is to discern variations and commonalities in TOM development within neurotypical, ASD, and SLD cohorts. Findings from this study will enhance our comprehension of TOM development among children with neurodevelopmental disorders and potentially inform early intervention and educational strategies tailored to bolster TOM comprehension in these demographics. Through a comparative lens, this research aims to uncover unique challenges and strengths inherent in TOM development among neurotypical, autistic, and SLD cohorts, thus informing interventions aimed at nurturing social cognition and adaptive functioning in these populations.

Keywords: *(ToM) theory of mind, desire belief, diverse desire, apparent emotion, knowledge access, autism spectrum disorder, neurotypical children, specific leaning disorder*

Theory of mind (TOM) is the ability to understand and attribute mental states, like beliefs and emotions, to oneself and others, enabling interpretation and prediction of behaviour. It develops early in childhood and continues to mature throughout life. TOM facilitates social interaction, communication, and empathy by allowing individuals to understand others' intentions and adjust their behaviour accordingly. It plays a crucial role in various aspects of social cognition and interpersonal relationships, including perspective-taking, empathy, and moral reasoning. Impaired TOM is associated with developmental disorders and psychological conditions, such as autism spectrum disorder and schizophrenia, leading to difficulties in understanding social cues and forming meaningful relationships.

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Neurotypical children

Neurotypical children are typically developing kids who learn and behave like most others their age. They can communicate, play, and comprehend things as expected for their age group. Unlike children with conditions such as autism or ADHD, neurotypical children do not face significant challenges in learning or interacting with others. Essentially, they are ordinary children who progress and acquire knowledge in the typical manner.

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition characterized by challenges in social communication and interaction, along with repetitive and restricted behaviors. It varies widely among individuals, with symptoms ranging from mild to severe. People with ASD may struggle with initiating or maintaining conversations, understanding nonverbal cues, and forming relationships. They may also experience delays in speech, difficulty with gestures, and repetitive speech or actions. Additionally, individuals with ASD often adhere rigidly to routines, have difficulties with change, and exhibit intense interests. Sensory sensitivities, such as heightened or reduced sensitivity to stimuli, are common. Symptoms typically appear in early childhood and persist throughout life, though they may change over time. While some individuals with ASD have average intelligence, others may have developmental or intellectual disabilities. Co-occurring conditions, such as ADHD or anxiety, are also common. Diagnosis involves a comprehensive evaluation of behavior, communication, and social skills, following criteria outlined in the DSM-5. Treatment primarily focuses on early intervention.

Specific Learning Disorder (SLD)

SLD is a neurodevelopmental condition characterized by persistent difficulties in academic skills like reading, writing, or math, below expected levels for age and intelligence. These challenges stem from neurological differences, not other factors, and can impact academic performance and daily life. With targeted support and interventions, individuals with SLD can overcome challenges and achieve academic success. Early recognition and intervention are key for maximizing potential.

Diverse Desire

Desires are complex human yearnings, ranging from basic needs to deeper aspirations like love and meaning. Influenced by personal, cultural, and social factors, they guide actions and decisions, often unconsciously. Understanding desires is crucial in psychology, sociology, and philosophy, shaping behavior and well-being. However, desires can also lead to conflict and dissatisfaction when unattainable or conflicting. Managing desires involves aligning them with personal values and goals, ultimately driving self-fulfillment and happiness.

Diverse belief

Belief is a strong conviction or acceptance of something as true, influencing thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors, and forming the basis of one's perception of reality and worldview. These convictions span various domains such as religion, philosophy, science, politics, and personal beliefs, shaped by experiences, upbringing, education, and societal influences. They can be deeply ingrained and resistant to contrary evidence, yet dynamic and subject to change over time in response to new information or experiences. Understanding beliefs is crucial across disciplines like psychology, sociology, anthropology, and philosophy as they contribute to individual identity, social cohesion, and collective behavior.

False belief

False beliefs occur when individuals hold convictions contradicting reality or empirical evidence, often studied in developmental psychology and cognitive science within the context of theory of mind. These beliefs can arise due to misinformation, cognitive biases, or perceptual distortions, influencing perceptions, judgments, decisions, and behaviors, and impacting human cognition, communication, and social interaction.

Knowledge access

It refers to the ability to obtain information easily, crucial for decision-making and problem-solving. It involves accessing information through various means such as books, the internet, or asking others, essential for learning and overcoming challenges.

Apparent emotions

Apparent emotions are outwardly visible feelings expressed through behaviors, gestures, and expressions, providing insights into emotional states. While apparent emotions are often immediate reactions to stimuli, they may not always accurately reflect true feelings, as individuals may sometimes conceal or mask their emotions for various reasons.

REVIEW OF LITRATURE

- In their study, Jones et al. (2018) investigated the relationship between theory of mind (ToM), executive function (EF), and symptoms of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in adolescents. Utilizing structural equation modelling, they examined the cognitive abilities of 100 adolescents with ASD and found that ToM ability was linked to both social communication symptoms and restricted and repetitive behaviours (RRBs). Executive function was correlated with ToM but did not directly relate to symptom expression. The results suggest that ToM ability in adolescence may directly influence the manifestation of autistic symptoms.
- The study aimed to evaluate and compare theory of mind (ToM) and executive functions in children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and specific learning disorder (SLD). Twenty children diagnosed with ADHD, 20 with SLD, and 20 healthy children aged 7 to 15 were assessed using neuropsychological tests. Results revealed significant differences in ToM between ADHD and healthy groups, as well as between ADHD and SLD groups. SLD children also showed differences in ToM compared to healthy controls. Executive functions, particularly set-shifting and response inhibition, were poorer in both ADHD and SLD groups compared to healthy controls.
- Nilsson, K. K., & de López, K. J. (2016). Nilsson and de López (2016) conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis to explore the relationship between Theory of Mind (ToM) and specific language impairment (SLI) in children. Their analysis of 17 studies involving 745 children aged 4 to 12 revealed that children with SLI exhibited significantly lower ToM performance compared to typically developing peers of the same age (effect size, d = .98). This finding underscores the importance of further research into the developmental connection between language and ToM, as well as the broader implications of atypical language development. Child Development, 87(1), 143-153.

METHODOLOGY

Aim- The aim of this study is to conduct a comparative investigation into Theory of Mind (ToM) development among children aged 3 to 7 years, exploring differences between neurotypical children, those diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), and those with Specific Learning Disability (SLD).

Objectives

- Investigate early childhood development differences in three group.
- Identifying challenges with autistic children (TOM).
- Promoting social interaction and understanding of TOM.
- Investigate potential cognitive, social, and linguistic factors influencing TOM development within each group.
- Explore the association between TOM abilities and adaptive functioning in everyday social contexts.
- Provide insights into tailored intervention strategies to support TOM development in autistic and SLD children during early childhood.
- Assessing false belief, desired belief, desire, acquaintance, knowledge level in three groups.
- Addressing gap in present literature and population.

Hypothesis

- **H1** there is a significant difference in diverse desire in autistic and specific learning disorder children compare to neurotypical children state using TOM task aged 3-7.
- **H2** there is a significant difference in special Children in their early childhood as compare to neurotypical children in diverse belief.
- **H3** There must be a significant difference in knowledge access in specific learning disorder children, autism spectrum disorder and neurotypical children aged 3-7 using well man and Liu task.
- **H4** Finding significantly difference in False Belief Test performance comparing autistic, neurotypical children, and specific learning disorder children within the age range (3-7) using TOM TASK BY WELLMEN AND LEU.
- **H5** there is a significant difference in apparent emotions in neurotypical Children aged 3-7 compare to autistic spectrum disorder and specific learning disorder children.
- **H6** There are significant differences in theory of mind abilities among the three groups within the specified age range. (3-7) year.

Variables

1. Independent Variable- autistic children, Neurotypical children, Specific learning disorder children
2. Dependent Variable- Theory of Mind (TOM) (all the children must be in age range of (3-7)

Sample

A sample size of N=45 each group consist 15 children age ranged (3-7) year old who identified as neurotypical, autistic, or specific learning disorder.

Description of the tools employed

The "Unexpected Contents" task developed by Wellman and Liu (2004) is a widely used measure to assess Theory of Mind (ToM) in children. In this task, a child is presented with a container (often a box or a bag) that holds an unexpected item, such as pencils inside a candy box. The child is asked what they initially thought was inside the container before they saw its contents. Then, the child is asked to predict what another person, who has not seen the inside of the container, would think is inside.

The task evaluates the child's ability to understand that others may hold false beliefs about the contents of the container, even when the child knows the true contents. It requires perspective- taking and the ability to understand that different individuals may have different beliefs based on their knowledge or lack thereof. The child's responses are analyzed to assess their level of understanding of false beliefs, a fundamental aspect of theory of mind development.

Statistical Analysis

Inferential statistics- this study aim to compare Theory of Mind (ToM) scores among neurotypical, autistic, and specific learning disability (SLD) children aged 3-7. To do this, we will collect ToM scores from each group and conduct a one-way ANOVA test. Before performing the ANOVA, we will ensure that our data meets the assumptions of the test, including checking for homogeneity of variances and normality of data distribution. If the ANOVA reveals significant differences in ToM scores among the groups, we will interpret these findings and discuss their implications within the context of existing research on ToM development in children with different cognitive profiles.

Table 1 Comparison between autistic children, Neurotypical children, Specific learning disorder children on a variable diverse desire.

S.no	DIVERSE DESIRE	SUM OF SQUARES	DF	MEAN SQUARE	F	SIG.	Remark
1	Between group	.044	2	.022	.083	.920	P<.05
2	Within group	11.22	42	.267			
3	Total	11.244	44				

95% confidence interval of the difference

This table compares the diverse desire between autistic, Neurotypical and Specific learning disorder children's The sample size is 15 for autistic children,15 for Neurotypical children and 15 for Specific learning disorder children.

- **Between Group Variation:** The variation between different groups defined by levels of diverse desire. The sum of squares for this source of variation is 0.044, with 2 degrees of freedom and a mean square of 0.022. The F-value is 0.083, and the associated significance level is 0.920. Since the p-value is greater than 0.05.
- **Within Group Variation:** The variation within each group, or the residual error. The sum of squares for this source of variation is 11.22, with 42 degrees of freedom and a mean square of 0.267.
- **Total Variation:** The overall variation in the data. The sum of squares for this is 11.244, with 44 degrees of freedom.

Thus, this table suggest there are no significant differences between the groups defined by levels of "DESIRE" in relation to the outcome measure being studied, as the p-value is greater than the chosen significance level of 0.05.

Table 2 Comparison between autistic children, Neurotypical children, Specific learning disorder children on a variable diverse belief.

S.no	DIVERSE BELIEF	SUM OF SQUARES	DF	MEAN SQUARE	F	SIG.	Remark
1	Between group	1.911	2	.956	4.778	.014	P<.05
2	Within group	8.400	42	.200			
3	Total	10.311	44				

95% confidence interval of the difference

This table compares the diverse belief between autistic, Neurotypical and Specific learning disorder children's The sample size is 15 for autistic children,15 for Neurotypical children and 15 for Specific learning disorder children.

- **Between Group Variation:** The variation between three groups of children. The sum of squares for this source of variation is 1.911, with 2 degrees of freedom and a mean square of 0.956. The F- value is 4.778, which is statistically significant at p < .05 level, indicating that there are significant differences between the groups.
- **Within Group Variation:** The variation within each group, or the residual error. The sum of squares for this source of variation is 8.400, with 42 degrees of freedom and a mean square of 0.200.
- **Total Variation:** The overall variation in the data. The sum of squares for this is 10.311, with 44 degrees of freedom.
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Thus, this table suggests that there are significant differences between the groups being compared based on the given variable (BELIEF), as indicated by the significant F-value (4.778) at the p <.05 level.

Table 3 Comparison between autistic children, Neurotypical children, Specific learning disorder children on a variable knowledge access.

S.no	KNOWLEDGE ACCESS	SUM OF SQUARES	DF	MEAN SQUARE	F	SIG.	Remark
1	Between group	3.378	2	1.689	10.231	.001	P<.05
2	Within group	6.933	42	.165			
3	Total	10.311	44				

95% confidence interval of the difference

This table compares the knowledge access between autistic, Neurotypical and Specific learning disorder children's The sample size is 15 for autistic children,15 for Neurotypical children and 15 for Specific learning disorder children.

- **Between Group Variation:** The variation between different groups defined by levels of "knowledge access". The sum of squares for this source of variation is 3.378, with 2 degrees of freedom and a mean square of 1.689. The F-value is 10.231,

and the associated significance level is less than 0.001. Since the p-value is much less than 0.05.

- **Within Group Variation:** The variation within each group, or the residual error. The sum of squares for this source of variation is 6.933, with 42 degrees of freedom and a mean square of 0.165.
- **Total Variation:** The overall variation in the data. The sum of squares for this is 10.311, with 44 degrees of freedom.

Thus, this table suggests that there are significant differences between the groups defined by levels of access" in relation to the outcome measure being studied, as the p-value is much less than the chosen significance level of 0.05.

Table 4 Comparison between autistic children, Neurotypical children, Specific learning disorder children on a variable false belief.

S.no	FALSE BELIEF	SUM OF SQUARES	DF	MEAN SQUARE	F	SIG.	Remark
1	Between group	2.178	2	1.089	5.044	.011	P<.05
2	Within group	9.067	42	.216			
3	Total	11.244	44				

95% confidence interval of the difference

This table compares the false belief between autistic, Neurotypical and Specific learning disorder children's The sample size is 15 for autistic children,15 for Neurotypical children and 15 for Specific learning disorder children.

- **Between Group Variation:** This represents the variation between different groups defined by levels of "false belief". The sum of squares for this source of variation is 2.178, with 2 degrees of freedom and a mean square of 1.089. The F-value is 5.044, and the associated significance level is 0.011. Since the p-value is less than 0.05.
- **Within Group Variation:** This represents the variation within each group, or the residual error. The sum of squares for this source of variation is 9.067, with 42 degrees of freedom and a mean square of 0.216.
- **Total Variation:** This represents the overall variation in the data. The sum of squares for this is 11.244, with 44 degrees of freedom.

Thus, this table suggests that there are significant differences between the groups defined by levels of "false belief" in relation to the outcome measure being studied, as the p-value is less than the chosen significance level of 0.05.

Table 5 Comparison between autistic children, Neurotypical children, Specific learning disorder children on a variable RAE emotion.

S.no	RAE EMOTION	SUM OF SQUARES	DF	MEAN SQUARE	F	SIG.	Remark
1	Between group	3.244	2	1.622	8.661	.001	P<.05
2	Within group	7.867	42	.187			
3	Total	11.111	44				

95% confidence interval of the difference

This table compares the RAE emotion between autistic, Neurotypical and Specific learning disorder children's The sample size is 15 for autistic children,15 for Neurotypical children and 15 for Specific learning disorder children.

- **Between Group Variation:** This represents the variation between different groups defined by levels of "Rae Emotion". The sum of squares for this source of variation is 3.244, with 2 degrees of freedom and a mean square of 1.622. The F-value is 8.661, and the associated significance level is less than 0.001. Since the p-value is less than 0.05.
- **Within Group Variation:** This represents the variation within each group, or the residual error. The sum of squares for this source of variation is 7.867, with 42 degrees of freedom and a mean square of 0.187.
- **Total Variation:** This represents the overall variation in the data. The sum of squares for this is 11.111, with 44 degrees of freedom.

Thus, this table suggests that there are significant differences between the groups defined by levels of "Rae Emotion" in relation to the outcome measure being studied, as the p-value is less than the chosen significance level of 0.05.

Table 6 Comparison between autistic children, Neurotypical children, Specific learning disorder children on a variable theory of mind.

S.no	THEORY OF MIND	SUM OF SQUARES	DF	MEAN SQUARE	F	SIG.	Remark
1	Between group	44.044	2	22.022	13.239	.001	P<.05
2	Within group	69.867	42	1.663			
3	Total	113.911	44				

95% confidence interval of the difference

This table compares theory of mind between autistic, Neurotypical and Specific learning disorder children's The sample size is 15 for autistic children,15 for Neurotypical children and 15 for Specific learning disorder children.

- **Between Group Variation:** This represents the variation between different groups defined by levels of "Theory of Mind". The sum of squares for this source of variation is 44.044, with 2 degrees of freedom and a mean square of 22.022. The F-value is 13.239, and the associated significance level is less than 0.001. Since the p-value is less than 0.05.
- **Within Group Variation:** This represents the variation within each group, or the residual error. The sum of squares for this source of variation is 69.867, with 42 degrees of freedom and a mean square of 1.663.
- **Total Variation:** This represents the overall variation in the data. The sum of squares for this is 113.911, with 44 degrees of freedom.

Thus, this table suggests that there are significant differences between the groups defined by levels of "THEORY OF MIND" in relation to the outcome measure being studied, as the p-value is less than the chosen significance level of 0.05.

DISCUSSION

The study titled "Theory of Mind (ToM): A Comparative Study Between Neurotypical, Autistic, and Specific Learning Disability (SLD) Children (Ages 3-7)" examines ToM development among children within these groups.

The first hypothesis investigated whether there would be a significant difference in diverse desire understanding among neurotypical, autistic, and specific learning disorder (SLD) children aged 3- 7, as measured by Theory of Mind (ToM) tasks. Contrary to expectations, the study found no significant differences between the groups in their understanding of diverse desires. This outcome suggests challenges in accurately measuring diverse desires, particularly among children with neurodevelopmental disorders, as highlighted by previous research identifying limitations in autistic children's ability to comprehend and express diverse desires. Additionally, the broad spectrum of cognitive and behavioral profiles within these disorders complicates straightforward comparisons, emphasizing the need to consider individual differences within diagnostic categories.

The second hypothesis aimed to uncover differences in diverse belief comprehension among children with neurotypical development, autism spectrum disorder (ASD), and SLD. The study revealed significant differences between the groups, supporting the notion that children with special needs may exhibit distinct patterns of understanding and expressing diverse beliefs. This aligns with existing research indicating that children with ASD may struggle with theory of mind (TOM) tasks, impacting their comprehension of others' beliefs and perspectives. Similarly, children with SLD may face challenges in belief understanding due to cognitive processing difficulties. The findings underscore the importance of considering cognitive profiles and developmental trajectories when assessing belief comprehension in diverse populations.

The third hypothesis explored whether there would be significant differences in knowledge access among children with SLD, ASD, and neurotypical development. The study confirmed significant differences between the groups, reflecting the varied cognitive profiles and information processing strategies observed across different child populations. Children with SLD and ASD often present distinct cognitive challenges, such as deficits in working memory and processing speed, which can impact their ability to access and utilize information effectively. Furthermore, environmental and contextual factors, including instructional methods and social support, play crucial roles in shaping knowledge acquisition for children with neurodevelopmental disorders.

The fourth hypothesis investigated differences in False Belief Test (FBT) performance among autistic, neurotypical, and SLD children aged 3-7, using TOM tasks. The study revealed significant differences between the groups, highlighting the complex cognitive processes underlying belief comprehension within these populations. Autistic children often struggle with comprehending false beliefs, while children with SLD may face challenges due to deficits in working memory and processing speed. Additionally, developmental trajectories indicate significant advancements in TOM abilities during early childhood, emphasizing the importance of age-appropriate assessments when evaluating belief understanding.

The fifth hypothesis examined whether there would be significant differences in observable emotions among neurotypical, autistic, and SLD children aged 3-7. The study confirmed

significant differences between the groups, reflecting the intricate dynamics of emotional expression and regulation across diverse developmental contexts. Children with neurodevelopmental disorders may manifest atypical patterns of emotional expression due to challenges in forming secure attachments and interpreting social cues. These findings underscore the importance of considering emotional development trajectories and individual differences when assessing observable emotions in diverse populations.

The sixth hypothesis investigated differences in theory of mind abilities among neurotypical, autistic, and SLD children. The study confirmed significant differences between the groups, highlighting the challenges individuals with ASD and SLD face in understanding others' mental states. While theory of mind deficits are commonly associated with ASD, emerging research suggests that children with SLD may also encounter difficulties in this domain. These findings underscore the need for tailored interventions aimed at bolstering social cognition and communication skills in children with diverse neurodevelopmental profiles.

CONCLUSION

The study aimed to compare Theory of Mind (ToM) development in children aged 3 to 7 across neurotypical, autism spectrum disorder (ASD), and specific learning disorder (SLD) populations. The results offer nuanced insights into cognitive and social complexities among these groups. Through hypothesis testing, the study revealed challenges in measuring diverse desires accurately and emphasized the significance of individual differences and contextual factors. Moreover, significant differences were observed in diverse belief comprehension, knowledge access, False Belief Test (FBT) performance, observable emotions, and overall ToM abilities, highlighting diverse cognitive profiles and developmental trajectories. These findings underscore the necessity for tailored interventions and holistic approaches to support cognitive and social development in children with neurodevelopmental disorders.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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