

AUTISM: THEORY OF MIND REVISITED

UTA FRITH

Presentation Monday 8.30

The Theory of Mind (ToM) deficit hypothesis of autism now has a 25-year history with some rocky patches. The bold proposal made by Baron-Cohen, Leslie & Frith in 1985 was that a lack of a ToM or mentalising mechanism caused the core social impairments of autism. A neural basis of this mechanism was postulated and it became possible to investigate this via brain imaging techniques. However, based on a meta-analysis Happé (1994) showed that able individuals with autistic disorder were capable of solving ToM problems, albeit with a delay. Recently, an implicit version of the standard False Belief scenario was developed, which makes it possible to detect implicit mentalising ability in very young babies using eye tracking techniques.

This technique revealed that autistic adults who pass a wide range of standard ToM tests still do not possess a spontaneous implicit mentalising ability. Research has also addressed the ability to attribute feelings to oneself, and here too characteristic impairments have been found in autistic individuals, related to alexithymia. Thus, a ToM deficit in autism can be revealed in behaviour as well as in brain activation patterns, and is able to explain a wide range of phenomena in autism.



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Uta Frith is Emeritus Professor in Cognitive Development. She has published many papers and books on autism and dyslexia. Her most well known book is "Autism: Explaining the Enigma" (1989; Danish edition 1992, Reitzel; 2nd ed. 2003) which provides an introduction to the cognitive neuroscience of autism. Her influence on the field can be seen in a book edited by Dorothy Bishop, Margaret Snowling, & Sarah-Jayne Blakemore "Neurocognitive approaches to developmental disorders: A Festschrift for Uta Frith", Psychology Press, 2008 (Special issue of Q. J. Exp. Psychol.). She is Visiting Professor at Aarhus University, where she is participating in the project on "Interacting minds - a biological basis".