



**University
of Victoria**

Graduate Studies

Notice of the Final Oral Examination
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

of

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MA (University of Victoria, 2013)
BSc Hons. (University of Toronto, 2007)

“Varieties of Social Understanding”

Department of Psychology

Wednesday, October 23, 2019

9:00 A.M.

Clearihue Building

Room B017

Supervisory Committee:

Dr. Ulrich Mueller, Department of Psychology, University of Victoria (Supervisor)

Dr. James Tanaka, Department of Psychology, UVic (Member)

Dr. Jeremy Carpendale, Department of Psychology, Simon Fraser University (Outside Member)

External Examiner:

Dr. Katherine Rice Warnell, Department of Psychology, Texas State University

Chair of Oral Examination:

Prof. Lara Wilson, Department of English, UVic

Abstract

Philosophical and psychological theories of social understanding have largely focused on the construct of “theory of mind” (ToM) and the inferential processes that may be necessary for understanding the meaning of others’ behaviour. On these traditional accounts, social understanding has often been described as a process of “mind reading” or “mentalizing”, where one imputes mental states to others to make sense of their behaviour. However, recent work from social neuroscience and enactivist and phenomenological perspectives have pointed to the importance of considering non-inferential forms of social understanding that may be a more basic or foundational way in which we understand others. This dissertation investigates the relationship between these different forms of social understanding by examining the role of perceptual, motor, and conceptual processes in how we understand others. One hundred and two older adolescents and adults completed a battery of psychophysical and paper & pencil tasks. Correlations showed coherence amongst measures that assessed participants’ perceptual sensitivity to social information, with minimal coherence across “theory of mind” tasks. Explanatory factor analysis conducted on 13 measures yielded a meaningful 4 factor solution that supported the distinction between conceptual or inferential measures and more direct, perceptual forms of social understanding. Overall, the findings from this study highlight the importance of considering the variety of ways in which we can understand others and provides empirical support for a more pluralistic and comprehensive account of social understanding.