



Department of Psychology

The University of Hong Kong

香港大學心理學系

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Departmental Seminar

From Natural Play to Theory of Mind: How Everyday Mother–Child Interaction Supports Social Understanding



Prof. Jihyun Sung

Professor

Department of Child Psychology and Education
Social Innovation Convergence Program
Sungkyunkwan University

10:00a.m. – 11:00a.m.

Room 715, 7/F

The Jockey Club Tower

Centennial Campus

The University of Hong Kong

Abstract

How do children come to understand other people's minds, and why do they differ so markedly in this capacity? This talk advances a social-pragmatic answer: children build theory of mind by co-constructing meaning with caregivers in everyday talk, rather than simply absorbing the quantity of mental-state language they hear. Drawing on a program of research spanning fine-grained micro-coding and large-scale naturalistic observation, Prof. Sung integrates three lines of evidence. First, in a longitudinal study of mother–toddler pretend play, collaborative communication acts—especially other-focused support and confirmation—predicted false-belief understanding at age 4, with toddlers contributing as active agents and a genuine co-construction interaction effect. Second, qualitative analysis of Korean mother–child book-reading shows how language-specific pragmatic resources (sentence-ending suffixes, evidentials, and honorifics) carry epistemic stance and perspective alignment, suggesting that theory of mind is universal in mechanism but culturally calibrated in its communicative phenotype. Third, ongoing work comparing naturalistic and structured contexts, using open, shareable video protocols (PLAY / GlobalBABIES; Databrary), demonstrates how measurement context shapes what we observe and how micro-coding and big-data observation can complement one another. By situating Korean evidence within broader debates on language, pragmatics, and Theory of Mind, the presentation highlights how East Asian developmental data can refine dominant models of socio-cognitive development and inform culturally responsive approaches to parent–child and teacher–child communication.

About the Speaker

Jihyun Sung, Ph.D., is a Professor in the Department of Child Psychology and Education / Social Innovation Convergence Program at Sungkyunkwan University, South Korea. Her research focuses on early childhood development and education, with particular attention to the complex mechanisms through which family, educational, and sociocultural contexts shape young children's developmental trajectories. Drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives from developmental science and early childhood education, Professor Sung examines children's social, cognitive, linguistic, and emotional development amid rapid socioeconomic and educational change. Her recent scholarly work addresses a broad spectrum of topics, including mother–child shared book reading, play-based learning, and the holistic well-being of the early childhood education and care workforce. Specifically, she investigates early socio-cognitive development, exploring how collaborative communication between mothers and toddlers shapes theory of mind, executive function, and social understanding. Methodologically, her research spans fine-grained micro-analysis of parent–child interactions and large-scale, open-science naturalistic observations, such as the PLAY and GlobalBABIES projects. Professor Sung is particularly interested in cross-cultural and Korean-specific pathways of language socialization, ultimately aiming to translate developmental findings into culturally responsive approaches for parent and teacher education.

Zoom Meeting (For participants who couldn't attend the Seminar in person)

<https://hku.zoom.us/j/93396004156?pwd=ijdzJIasDAwccixSSpXpbCkkDRmgtX.1>

Meeting ID: 933 9600 4156 Password: 205887

~ All are Welcome ~

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