

Mindshaping: A New Framework for Understanding Human Social Cognition (MIT Press)

By Tadeusz Wieslaw Zawidzki

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In this novel account of distinctively human social cognition, Tadeusz Zawidzki argues that the key distinction between human and nonhuman social cognition consists in our complex, diverse, and flexible capacities to shape each other's minds in ways that make them easier to interpret. Zawidzki proposes that such "mindshaping" -- which takes the form of capacities and practices such as sophisticated imitation, pedagogy, conformity to norms, and narrative self-constitution -- is the most important component of human social cognition. Without it, he argues, none of the other components of what he terms the "human sociocognitive syndrome," including sophisticated language, cooperation, and sophisticated "mindreading," would be possible.

Challenging the dominant view that sophisticated mindreading -- especially propositional attitude attribution -- is the key evolutionary innovation behind distinctively human social cognition, Zawidzki contends that the capacity to attribute such mental states depends on the evolution of mindshaping practices. Propositional attitude attribution, he argues, is likely to be unreliable unless most of us are shaped to have similar kinds of propositional attitudes in similar circumstances. Motivations to mindshape, selected to make sophisticated cooperation possible, combine with low-level mindreading abilities that we share with nonhuman species to make it easier for humans to interpret and anticipate each other's behavior. Eventually, this led, in human prehistory, to the capacity to attribute full-blown propositional attitudes accurately -- a capacity that is parasitic, in phylogeny and today, on prior capacities to shape minds. Bringing together findings from developmental psychology, comparative psychology, evolutionary psychology, and philosophy of psychology, Zawidzki offers a strikingly original framework for understanding human social cognition.

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Editorial Review

Review

Humans have extraordinarily complex minds, yet we are not opaque to one another. We coordinate remarkably well on the basis of mutual expectations of one another's acts. The received view is that we do this through a remarkably accurate and powerful theory of mind, a theory that we apply in social navigation. Zawidzki has picked up an alternative -- we shape one another's minds in development and in normal social interaction, thus making human thought and motivation vastly more stable, coherent, and transparent than it would otherwise be. Zawidzki has taken this idea and developed it into a cohesive and systematic view of the evolution and development of human cognition.

(Kim Sterelny, School of Philosophy, Australian National University; author of *The Evolved Apprentice: How Evolution Made Humans Unique*)

Mindshaping practices and mechanisms are crucial in the social lives of humans. In this insightful book, Zawidzki develops an interesting hypothesis about the role that mindshaping plays in human ontogenetic development, and about the role it played in human evolution. The mindshaping framework elaborated here is a useful tool for making progress in the understanding of our peculiar species.

(Matteo Mameli, Reader in Philosophy, King's College London)

The core idea of *Mindshaping* is dazzling in its simplicity and explanatory power: the interpretation of human behavior essentially depends on current regulative practices. This stimulating book develops highly controversial but challenging claims that everyone interested in social cognition and in propositional attitudes should want to think about.

(Joëlle Proust, Director of Research, National Center for Scientific Research (C.N.R.S.), Institut Jean-Nicod)

The core hypothesis of *Mindshaping* is likely to be true...sophisticated...There is much to admire about this book and it is enjoyable to read...an important book.

(*Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*)

Zawidzki makes an admirable attempt to synthesize a wide range of phenomena...He also gives an admirably clear overview of the theoretical landscape, and for this reason alone I would recommend Mindshaping to both experts and novices alike.

(*Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*)

Mindshaping is a *tour de force*. It rigorously reenvisions humans' deeply social nature and presents a penetrating challenge to entrenched intuitions about the centrality of folk psychology. Its key innovation is

the idea that our individual abilities to make sense of ourselves and other people is a "group accomplishment" grounded in our shared practices for regulating behavior.

(*The Review of Metaphysics*)

About the Author
Tadeusz Wieslaw Zawidzki is Associate Professor of Philosophy and Codirector of the Mind-Brain Evolution Cluster at the George Washington University. He is the author of *Dennett*.

Users Review

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Christina Vallejo:

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