

Report by:

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I must confess that I was a bit star struck when I first arrived at IMFAR. After spending several years reading articles and books written by the biggest names in autism research, it was surreal to be sitting beside them, meeting them, and listening to them present their latest research. It is one thing to read about research, it is another thing to hear someone actually describe it.

The most notable moment for me was attending the presentation by Uta Frith, who was honoured with a lifetime achievement award. She is truly a central figure in autism research and theory. She was one of the researchers who developed the weak central coherence theory to describe the core deficits of autism. This theory purports that the primary deficit in autism is a failure to integrate information across multiple contexts into a meaningful whole.

Uta Frith is also a key figure in the research on the challenges that individuals with autism face when trying to understand that inner states cause actions in other people—a result of their deficits in developing theory of mind. At the conference she talked about some of the highlights of the research that she is currently working on in this domain. She described an implicit theory of mind task that she uses to assess these skills. It involves in-

animate objects moving in patterns that suggest intention. This is a brilliant and creative way to tap into theory of mind ability without requiring that the participant be equipped with extensive verbal abilities, one of the major challenges in theory of mind research with individuals with autism.

I particularly enjoyed her reminder to also focus on the strengths of individuals with autism that occur as a result of their deficits in theory of mind: they can be less manipulative, less deceptive, and less focussed on reputation than their peers. It is important that clinicians, researchers, and parents remember that it isn't always about the deficits that individuals with autism face, we should also focus on their strengths.

In addition to meeting many notable researchers it was also wonderful to meet parents of individuals with autism to learn about their stories of what works and what does not work and, more importantly, to hear their recommendations for future research. It was really inspiring to be surrounded by so many people with a common goal: to better understand and assist individuals and families with autism. I'd like to thank Autism Ontario for providing the opportunity to attend IMFAR; I am already packing my bags for IMFAR 2008.