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SOCIAL THINKING IN PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT: FROM THE UNIVERSAL TO THE INDIVIDUAL

Summary.

The relationship between universal psychological foundations and individual developmental trajectories remains a central challenge in contemporary psychology and social sciences. While species-level traits such as empathy, cooperation, and cognitive flexibility are widely recognized as evolutionary universals, the mechanisms through which these shared predispositions are transformed into socially situated forms of individuality remain insufficiently conceptualized. This article proposes social thinking as a key mediating mechanism between species-level traits and individual development within sociocultural contexts. Social thinking is conceptualized as an integrative and reflexive capacity that enables individuals to interpret social reality, navigate normative expectations, and position themselves meaningfully within relational and institutional systems. Drawing on evolutionary psychology, sociocultural theory, personality psychology, and narrative approaches, the article demonstrates how social thinking translates universal psychological potentials into individualized developmental trajectories. Particular attention is given to the role of cultural norms, institutional recognition, and contextual plasticity in shaping diverse forms of social thinking, including both visible and quiet modes of social presence. The proposed framework contributes to integrative models of personality development and offers implications for education, talent development, and psychosocial support systems by highlighting social thinking as a core developmental resource that sustains both personal distinctiveness and social embeddedness.

Keywords: social thinking; species-level traits; individuality; sociocultural context; personality development; contextual plasticity; recognition.

The question of how universal psychological foundations are transformed into concrete individual trajectories of development remains a central yet unresolved issue in contemporary psychology and social sciences. While extensive research has demonstrated the existence of species-level traits – such as basic social needs, emotional capacities, cognitive structures, and motivational systems – far less attention has been paid to the mechanisms that mediate the translation of these universal dispositions into lived personal experience within specific sociocultural environments [5; 19].

This theoretical gap becomes particularly visible in periods of social transformation, uncertainty, and crisis. Rapid cultural change, institutional instability, and shifting normative frameworks intensify the tension between shared human foundations and individual modes of adaptation [3; 11]. In such contexts, individuals are required not only to possess cognitive or emotional capacities but also to interpret complex social realities, negotiate competing expectations, and position themselves meaningfully within networks of relationships. These challenges cannot be adequately explained by reference to either biological universals or individual agency alone.

In recent decades, psychological research has increasingly acknowledged the need for integrative frameworks capable of bridging universality and individuality. Approaches such as the biopsychosocial model [10], ecological systems theory [3], and narrative models of personality [18] have emphasized that development emerges through dynamic interactions between biological predispositions, social environments, and personal meaning-making. However, despite these advances, the specific psychological mechanisms that enable individuals to navigate social reality while preserving personal distinctiveness remain insufficiently conceptualized.

The present article argues that social thinking constitutes a key mediating mechanism between species-level traits and individual development in sociocultural contexts. Social thinking is understood here not merely as social intelligence, interpersonal competence, or conformity to social norms, but as a higher-order integrative capacity that enables individuals to orient themselves reflexively within social reality. It involves the ability to interpret social situations, recognize implicit norms and power structures, anticipate the perspectives of others, and reflect on one's own position within a system of relationships [26; 28].

Importantly, social thinking operates at the intersection of evolutionary predispositions, cultural evolution, and institutional structures. It allows universal psychological potentials – such as empathy, cooperation, and meaning-making – to be transformed into individualized strategies of action, self-understanding, and social participation [2; 13]. Without this mediating function, species-level traits risk remaining abstract predispositions, while individuality risks becoming socially fragile, insufficiently recognized, or marginalized within dominant institutional frameworks.

Recent socio-psychological research has begun to gesture toward this mediating role through concepts such as contextual plasticity, socio-cultural scaffolding, and narrative identity [12; 17]. Yet these insights are rarely synthesized into a coherent framework that explicitly centers social thinking as a developmental mechanism. This article seeks to address that gap by offering an integrative theoretical analysis of social thinking as a bridge between species-level traits and individual developmental trajectories.

The aims of the article are threefold. First, it examines the evolutionary and psychological foundations of social thinking as rooted in species-level traits. Second, it analyzes the role of sociocultural contexts in shaping and transforming social thinking across different environments. Third, it conceptualizes social thinking as a mediating mechanism through which individuals negotiate the tension between universality and uniqueness, thereby supporting sustainable personal development within social systems.

Species-Level Traits as the Foundation of Social Thinking. Social thinking is grounded in a set of species-level psychological traits shaped through evolutionary processes and biological constraints. From an evolutionary perspective, humans are inherently social beings whose survival has historically depended on cooperation, communication, and the capacity to anticipate and interpret the behavior of others [5; 9]. Consequently, social orientation is not an auxiliary feature of human cognition but a foundational characteristic of the species.

Key species-level traits relevant to social thinking include fundamental social needs such as belonging and attachment [1], emotional capacities such as empathy and affective resonance [8], cognitive mechanisms such as theory of mind and perspective-taking [22], and motivational systems oriented toward cooperation, reciprocity, and social recognition [27]. These traits evolved as adaptive responses to the challenges of living in complex social groups, where coordination, trust, and mutual regulation were essential for survival.

One of the most influential empirical frameworks for describing species-level personality traits is the Five-Factor Model, which identifies openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism as broad dimensions observable across cultures [19]. The cross-cultural stability of these dimensions suggests that they reflect psychological universals rather than culturally contingent constructs. In the context of social thinking, agreeableness is associated with prosocial orientation and cooperation, openness with cognitive flexibility and meaning-making, and extraversion with social engagement and communicative initiative.

However, the existence of these traits alone does not guarantee the emergence of mature social thinking. Species-level traits provide developmental potential, not predetermined outcomes. For example, empathy as a biologically grounded capacity enables emotional attunement to others, yet it does not automatically translate into reflective social understanding or ethically grounded action [8]. Similarly, cognitive abilities such as abstraction and language facilitate complex social reasoning, but their realization depends on social learning and contextual scaffolding [28].

Developmental theories further emphasize that species-level traits unfold through interaction with the social environment. Classical frameworks such as Erikson's theory of psychosocial development [11] and Piaget's stages of cognitive development [21] highlight universal developmental tasks related to identity formation, autonomy, and social integration. While these tasks are shared across cultures, the ways in which individuals navigate them vary substantially depending on social context and personal experience.

Within this developmental perspective, social thinking can be conceptualized as an emergent capacity that arises when species-level traits are activated, integrated, and refined through social interaction. It represents a synthesis of emotional sensitivity, cognitive interpretation, and normative awareness into a coherent mode of relating to the social world [20]. This integration is inherently relational: social thinking is co-constructed through engagement with others, participation in cultural practices, and exposure to institutional norms.

At the species level, humans possess a shared readiness for social meaning-making. Symbolic thought, language, and narrative capacities enable individuals to interpret their experiences within broader social and cultural frameworks [4]. Through symbols and narratives, universal human concerns – such as belonging, recognition, and purpose – are connected to personal life stories, providing a foundation for reflective social positioning.

Nevertheless, species-level traits alone cannot account for the profound diversity observed in social thinking across individuals and contexts. While evolutionary foundations establish the possibility of social thinking, its form, depth, and orientation are shaped by sociocultural environments. This observation underscores the need to examine not only biological universals but also the contextual mechanisms that transform them into individualized patterns of social reasoning and action.

Species-level traits should therefore be understood as the raw material of social thinking rather than its final form. They define the boundaries of psychological potential but do not determine how individuals will interpret social reality, respond to social demands, or integrate personal identity within collective structures. The transition from potential to realization requires mediation – a process through which universal dispositions are translated into socially situated forms of understanding. It is precisely this mediating function that positions social thinking at the center of personality development within sociocultural contexts.

Sociocultural Contexts and the Transformation of Social Thinking. While species-level traits provide the foundational potential for social thinking, sociocultural contexts play a decisive role in shaping how this potential is expressed, constrained, or transformed. Human social thinking develops not only through biological maturation but also through continuous immersion in culturally mediated systems of meaning, norms, values, and practices. Culture functions as a powerful organizing framework that channels universal psychological dispositions into socially intelligible forms [13; 16].

From a socio-cultural perspective, social thinking emerges through processes of socialization, symbolic mediation, and participation in shared practices. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory emphasizes

that higher psychological functions are formed through internalization of culturally mediated interactions, particularly language and symbolic tools [28]. Social thinking, in this sense, is not merely an internal cognitive ability but a socially distributed and historically situated mode of understanding reality. Individuals learn how to think socially by engaging with culturally structured narratives, role expectations, and normative scripts.

Cultural evolution theory further illuminates how social thinking is shaped over time through the transmission and modification of social norms and behavioral strategies. According to Boyd and Richerson (1985) [2], cultural practices evolve through mechanisms analogous to biological selection, favoring patterns of behavior that enhance group cohesion, coordination, and adaptability. These culturally selected patterns influence which forms of social reasoning are encouraged, rewarded, or marginalized within a given society. Thus, social thinking reflects not only individual capacities but also the accumulated adaptive strategies of cultural groups.

Importantly, sociocultural contexts do not merely add content to pre-existing psychological structures; they actively transform the orientation and function of social thinking. Cross-cultural research has consistently demonstrated that cultural models of selfhood shape how individuals perceive social relationships, responsibility, and agency [16]. In more collectivist contexts, social thinking often prioritizes relational harmony, interdependence, and sensitivity to group norms, whereas in more individualistic contexts it may emphasize autonomy, self-expression, and personal choice. These orientations do not negate species-level traits but selectively amplify certain aspects of them while attenuating others.

Institutions constitute another critical sociocultural layer influencing social thinking. Educational systems, workplaces, and social organizations transmit explicit and implicit expectations regarding acceptable forms of social behavior and reasoning [3]. Institutional norms shape how individuals learn to interpret authority, recognition, competition, and cooperation. When institutional frameworks fail to acknowledge diverse forms of social thinking, individuals may experience what has been described as a gap between self-perceived individuality and external validation, leading to feelings of invisibility or marginalization [15].

Social thinking is therefore continuously negotiated at the intersection of personal meaning and sociocultural constraint. Individuals must learn not only to understand others but also to interpret the cultural logic governing social interactions. This process often involves tension: universal needs for belonging and recognition may conflict with cultural expectations that privilege conformity, productivity, or normative success. The way individuals resolve these tensions becomes a defining feature of their developmental trajectory.

Crucially, sociocultural contexts also provide resources for the refinement of social thinking. Through exposure to multiple perspectives, dialogical interaction, and symbolic narratives, individuals develop the capacity for reflexivity – an essential component of mature social thinking [4; 20]. Reflexive social thinking enables individuals to step back from immediate social demands, evaluate their own positioning, and consider alternative modes of participation. This capacity is particularly vital in pluralistic societies characterized by value diversity and rapid change.

Thus, sociocultural contexts should be understood not merely as external influences but as active environments that shape the structure, content, and ethical orientation of social thinking. They determine which forms of social reasoning are cultivated, which are suppressed, and which remain underdeveloped. At the same time, they offer the conditions under which social thinking can evolve from basic social adaptation into a reflective and integrative developmental mechanism.

Social Thinking as a Mediating Mechanism Between Universality and Individuality. Against this background, social thinking can be conceptualized as a mediating mechanism that translates species-level psychological traits into individualized patterns of development within sociocultural contexts. Mediation, in this sense, refers to the process by which universal predispositions are interpreted, reorganized, and enacted through socially situated forms of understanding and action. Social thinking performs this mediating function by enabling individuals to integrate biological potential, cultural meaning, and personal agency into coherent modes of social participation.

Unlike narrowly defined constructs such as social intelligence or interpersonal competence, social thinking encompasses a broader reflective dimension. It involves not only the ability to navigate social situations effectively but also the capacity to understand the implicit structures governing social life – norms, expectations, power relations, and symbolic meanings [26]. Through social thinking, individuals come to recognize themselves as participants in social systems rather than passive recipients of social influence.

At the level of personality development, social thinking functions as a regulatory mechanism that shapes how individuals relate to both collective structures and their own individuality. Species-level traits such as empathy, cooperation, and cognitive flexibility provide the psychological groundwork for this regulation. However, without mediation through social thinking, these traits may remain fragmented or contextually misaligned. For example, high empathy without reflective social thinking may lead to emotional over-involvement or self-erasure, while cognitive flexibility without social orientation may result in detachment or social isolation.

Social thinking enables individuals to calibrate their engagement with others by interpreting situational demands and personal boundaries. This calibration is particularly evident in contexts where institutional norms fail to accommodate individual difference. In such cases, social thinking allows individuals to maintain internal coherence and self-recognition even in the absence of external validation. The ability to sustain a sense of self under conditions of limited recognition reflects a mature form of social thinking grounded in reflexivity rather than compliance.

Recent research on contextual plasticity highlights this adaptive dimension of social thinking. Contextual plasticity refers to the capacity of personality to flexibly reorganize trait expression in response to changing social environments without losing core identity [24]. Social thinking operates as the cognitive-symbolic mechanism through which such plasticity becomes possible. By interpreting contextual cues and integrating them with personal values, individuals selectively activate different aspects of their species-level potential.

Narrative identity theory further supports the mediating role of social thinking. According to McAdams (2001) [17], individuals construct life narratives that integrate personal experiences with culturally available stories and symbols. Social thinking enables this narrative integration by allowing individuals to situate their personal trajectories within broader social and historical contexts. Through narrative reflection, universal human themes – such as struggle, growth, belonging, and transformation – are woven into unique personal meanings.

Importantly, social thinking does not prescribe a single optimal developmental outcome. Rather, it supports multiple viable forms of individuality. Some individuals express social thinking through visible leadership and active social engagement, while others manifest it through quieter forms of presence, endurance, and ethical consistency. These variations reflect different ways of mediating between universality and individuality, all grounded in the same species-level foundations.

In this sense, social thinking functions as a developmental bridge rather than a fixed trait. It links biological universals with sociocultural realities and personal meaning-making, enabling individuals to remain both socially embedded and personally distinct. Without this mediating mechanism, development risks becoming polarized: either dominated by conformity to external norms or fragmented by unintegrated individuality.

By conceptualizing social thinking as a mediating mechanism, the present framework offers a way to understand personality development as a dynamic negotiation rather than a linear progression. It highlights how individuals actively interpret and reshape their social worlds while drawing upon shared human capacities. This perspective not only advances theoretical understanding but also opens new avenues for supporting development in educational, organizational, and psychosocial contexts.

Individual Developmental Trajectories and Forms of Social Thinking. Individual development unfolds through diverse trajectories shaped by the interaction between species-level traits, sociocultural contexts, and personal meaning-making. While universal psychological foundations provide a shared starting point, the ways in which individuals enact, refine, and sustain social thinking vary considerably.

These variations should not be interpreted as deficits or deviations but as distinct forms of mediating between universality and individuality.

Social thinking manifests across a spectrum of developmental styles. In some cases, it is expressed through visible social engagement, leadership, and active participation in collective life. In others, it takes quieter forms characterized by reflective distance, ethical consistency, and internalized social responsibility. Both forms draw on the same species-level capacities – such as empathy, perspective-taking, and symbolic reasoning – but organize them differently in response to contextual demands and personal dispositions.

The notion of “quiet” or non-assertive individuality has received increasing attention in contemporary psychology, particularly in relation to introversion, sensitivity, and reflective forms of agency [6]. Individuals who embody these styles often engage deeply with social reality without seeking overt recognition or dominance. Their social thinking is oriented toward meaning, endurance, and coherence rather than visibility. Importantly, such forms of social thinking can remain underrecognized within institutional environments that privilege extraversion, productivity, or performative participation.

Narrative identity theory provides a useful framework for understanding these diverse trajectories. According to McAdams (2001) [17], individuals construct life stories that integrate personal experiences with culturally available narrative templates. Social thinking enables individuals to interpret their developmental experiences within these narrative structures, linking universal themes – such as struggle, belonging, and transformation – to unique personal meanings. Through narrative reflection, individuals make sense of social constraints and opportunities while maintaining continuity of self.

Empirical research suggests that developmental transitions – such as entry into higher education, career formation, or periods of social crisis – serve as critical points at which social thinking becomes especially salient [11; 23]. During these transitions, individuals must renegotiate their social positioning, reinterpret norms, and reassess personal values. Social thinking supports this process by allowing individuals to hold ambiguity, tolerate uncertainty, and integrate competing expectations without collapsing into conformity or withdrawal.

The concept of recognition plays a central role in shaping individual trajectories of social thinking. Social recognition contributes to the stabilization of identity by confirming that one’s mode of being and thinking is socially intelligible and valued [14]. When recognition is absent or inconsistent, individuals may experience a disjunction between internal self-understanding and external validation. Social thinking mediates this tension by enabling individuals to sustain self-recognition even in contexts of limited institutional acknowledgment.

Importantly, the capacity for social thinking does not eliminate vulnerability. Rather, it allows individuals to remain engaged with social reality while acknowledging personal limits. This balanced engagement reflects a mature form of development in which individuality is neither dissolved into social expectations nor isolated from relational life. Such trajectories illustrate how social thinking functions as a stabilizing mechanism across diverse developmental pathways.

Implications for Education and Support Systems. Understanding social thinking as a mediating mechanism has significant implications for education, talent development, and psychosocial support systems. Traditional approaches often focus on cognitive abilities, measurable competencies, or externally observable performance. While these factors are important, they do not fully capture the processes through which individuals integrate universal capacities with personal meaning and social responsibility.

Educational environments play a particularly influential role in shaping social thinking. Schools and universities function as institutional microcultures that transmit explicit curricula alongside implicit norms regarding success, participation, and recognition [3]. When educational systems prioritize narrow forms of achievement or uniform modes of engagement, they risk constraining the development of diverse forms of social thinking. Conversely, environments that encourage dialogue, reflexivity, and pluralism create conditions under which social thinking can mature.

From the perspective of talent development, social thinking should be recognized as a core developmental resource rather than a secondary outcome. Research on giftedness increasingly emphasizes the importance of contextual factors, ethical responsibility, and social integration alongside cognitive potential [25]. Supporting social thinking enables individuals to translate high abilities into socially meaningful contributions while maintaining personal integrity.

Psychological and pedagogical support systems can further enhance social thinking by incorporating narrative, relational, and reflective practices. Interventions that invite individuals to articulate their experiences, explore social dilemmas, and reflect on their positioning within groups foster meta-cognitive awareness and ethical sensitivity [4; 18]. Such practices help individuals navigate social complexity without reducing development to compliance or performance.

Institutional recognition mechanisms also warrant critical examination. Recognition that is narrowly tied to standardized metrics may overlook individuals whose social thinking manifests in less visible but equally vital ways. Expanding recognition frameworks to include relational contribution, ethical consistency, and reflective engagement can reduce the gap between self-perceived individuality and institutional validation [15].

Ultimately, supporting social thinking requires a shift from deficit-oriented models toward developmental frameworks that acknowledge both shared human capacities and individual trajectories. This shift aligns with broader movements in psychology and education toward holistic, person-centered approaches that value meaning, responsibility, and relational embeddedness.

This article has argued that social thinking functions as a key mediating mechanism between species-level psychological traits and individual development within sociocultural contexts. While evolutionary and biological foundations provide universal capacities for social orientation, these capacities do not automatically translate into coherent personal development. Their realization depends on mediation through socially situated forms of understanding, interpretation, and meaning-making.

By conceptualizing social thinking as an integrative and reflexive capacity, the present framework bridges the gap between universality and individuality. Social thinking enables individuals to transform shared human predispositions – such as empathy, cooperation, and symbolic reasoning – into individualized strategies of social participation. It supports the maintenance of personal distinctiveness while preserving relational embeddedness within cultural and institutional systems.

The analysis has shown that social thinking is shaped by sociocultural contexts, including cultural norms, socialization processes, and institutional structures. These contexts selectively amplify or constrain different forms of social reasoning, influencing developmental trajectories and experiences of recognition. At the same time, social thinking allows individuals to navigate these constraints with reflexivity, ethical awareness, and narrative coherence.

Importantly, social thinking does not prescribe a single model of successful development. Rather, it accommodates multiple forms of individuality, including both visible and quiet modes of social presence. Recognizing this diversity is essential for creating educational and support systems that foster sustainable development rather than conformity or fragmentation.

The framework proposed here contributes to contemporary debates in social, developmental, and personality psychology by offering a theoretically integrated account of how universality and individuality are dynamically mediated. Future research should further explore the empirical dimensions of social thinking across developmental stages, cultural contexts, and institutional environments. Such work holds promise for advancing both theoretical understanding and practical support of human development in an increasingly complex social world.

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СОЦІАЛЬНЕ МИСЛЕННЯ В ОСОБИСТІСНОМУ РОЗВИТКУ: ВІД УНІВЕРСАЛЬНОГО ДО ІНДИВІДУАЛЬНОГО

Анотація.

Співвідношення між універсальними психологічними зasadами та індивідуальними траєкторіями розвитку є однією з ключових проблем сучасної психології та соціальних наук. Попри те, що видові ознаки, зокрема емпатія, здатність до співпраці та когнітивна гнучкість, широко визнаються як еволюційні універсалії, механізми, через які ці спільні передумови трансформуються в соціально вкорінені форми індивідуальності, досі залишаються недостатньо концептуалізованими. У статті запропоновано розглядати соціальне мислення як ключовий медіативний механізм між видовими ознаками та індивідуальним розвитком у межах соціокультурних контекстів. Соціальне мислення осмислюється як інтегративна та рефлексивна здатність, що дає змогу особистості інтерпретувати соціальну реальність, орієнтуватися в системі нормативних очікуваннях і осмислено позиціонувати себе в межах міжособистісних та інституційних систем. Спираючись на здобутки еволюційної психології, соціокультурної теорії, психології особистості та наративних підходів, у статті обґрунтовано, як соціальне мислення забезпечує перетворення універсальних психологічних потенціалів на індивідуалізовані траєкторії розвитку. Особливу увагу приділено ролі культурних норм, інституційного визнання та контекстуальної пластичності у формуванні різних форм соціального мислення, зокрема як виразних, так і латентних способів соціальної присутності. Запропонована концептуальна рамка сприяє розвитку інтегративних моделей особистісного розвитку та окреслює практичні імплікації для освіти, розвитку обдарованості й психосоціального супроводу, розглядаючи соціальне мислення як базовий ресурс розвитку, що підтримує водночас індивідуальну унікальність і соціальну вкоріненість особистості.

Ключові слова: соціальне мислення; видові ознаки; індивідуальність; соціокультурний контекст; розвиток особистості; контекстуальна пластичність; визнання.

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