



M. Jeffrey Farrar, Ph.D.

Across his dedicated career, Dr. Jeff Farrar thought broadly about children's language and cognitive development and was curious about the many ways it could be studied through the lens of affective development and language. He published extensively on topics spanning from children's acquisition of grammatical morphemes and verbs to children's conceptual development, memory, narrative skills and theory of mind. His work is highly cited and will continue to have an impact on the way we think about the intersection of language and cognition. His scholarly inquisitiveness and warm personality drew students to work in his lab: he was always interested in their ideas and was an eager and supportive collaborator. He was a thoughtful, respectful colleague with a calming and kind presence that won him the admiration of his colleagues and students alike.

Dr. Jeff Farrar completed his PhD in Psychology (Cognition & Development) at Emory University in 1985. With his advisor, Mike Tomasello, he co-authored a path-breaking, seminal paper on the role of joint attention in early language acquisition ([Tomasello & Farrar, 1986](#)). His dissertation work examined how recasts impact the acquisition of grammatical morphemes ([Farrar, 1992](#)). During a post-doctoral appointment at the University of Denver with Gail Goodman, Jeff initiated what became a string of influential publications on the early development of autobiographical memory (e.g., [Farrar & Goodman, 1990](#)).

Jeff joined the Developmental Area of the Psychology Department at the University of Florida (UF) in 1987. Throughout his career, Jeff and his graduate students explored the interrelations between language and cognitive development. Beginning in the mid-1990s, his attention increasingly turned to the complicated relation between language and theory of mind. The breadth of Jeff's work in this area reflects his deep scholarly curiosity and his openness to fully embracing students' ideas and interests. Jeff and his students' published work examined the influence of syntactic and phonological features of language on theory of mind development. His expansive approach included cross-linguistic studies and extended to several populations including children with autism, children with specific language impairment, low income children, and bilingual children. His methodological approach was equally broad and incorporated meta-analyses, longitudinal designs, microgenetic analysis, and EEG. He was funded through the National Institutes of Health for his work on event knowledge and early language acquisition, showing that children's lexical type and action verb production as well as their MLU increased when parents and children engaged in recurrent, as opposed to unique, events over time. He was also funded by the National Science Foundation for his work on script (general memory for typical activities during routine events, e.g., going to play in the park) and episodic memory (memory for a specific event episode), which elucidated the relations between these different types of memory and their development over early childhood.

Jeff's most recent work made significant contributions to understanding the relation of language to theory of mind in early childhood. His work showed that language development plays a significant role in false belief development. Jeff embraced a social constructivist perspective in which participation in linguistically-mediated conversations contribute to children's discovery of the mind ([Tompkins, Farrar & Montgomery, 2019](#)). He contributed to the debate in the literature by proposing the multiple pathways hypothesis, suggesting that depending on the population of children, the role of language in false belief development differs. For example, for typically developing children, theory of mind is socially-constructed ([Farrar et al., 2013](#)). Children with language delays, however, (autism, Specific Language Impairment) have difficulty participating in social interactions and need complements to represent a false belief ([Farrar et al., 2017](#)). His innovative multiple pathways hypothesis was supported by a meta-analysis of over 2200 typically and atypically developing children ([Farrar et al., 2017](#)). Jeff's research also highlighted the contribution of metalinguistic abilities in the false belief advantage in bilingual children ([Diaz & Farrar, 2018](#)). He recently incorporated EEG into his work and examined similarity and differences between complement syntax and false belief. Using both EEG and ERP measures, patterns of brain oscillations indicate that FB and complementation tasks have both common and unique brain signatures ([Guan, Farrar, & Keil, 2018](#)). Combined, Jeff's body of work provided evidence for the importance of false belief understanding for later linguistic and cognitive development and suggests that there are multiple pathways and bidirectional interactions between language development and false belief understanding.

In addition to his many empirical and theoretical contributions to the field of cognitive development, Jeff was an outstanding teacher, mentor, advisor and friend to so many of the students who have walked the halls of the psychology building at the University of Florida since 1987. He was respected and valued by all who worked with him. He served as the primary research advisor to 18 Ph.D. students, many of whom continue his legacy by making important contributions to our understanding of, and support of, child development through their own research, teaching, outreach and engagement in public policy.

Jeff generously gave his time to the department, college, and university. His leadership of the Undergraduate program in the Department of Psychology was outstanding. He served as the Undergraduate Coordinator from 2013-2020 for both our residential program and our UF Online major. During this time, he developed student learning outcomes for the BS Program and contributed to the development of the Curriculum for the UF Online Psychology BA Program. In any given year he coordinated advising for over 1400 majors and developed a workshop for new majors. Dr. Farrar's dedication to undergraduate education led to a well-deserved 7 teaching awards at the college and university level. Dr. Farrar also served as Graduate Coordinator for the Department of Psychology and as the Developmental Graduate Program Area Director from 1997-2005. He was a kind and helpful mentor to not just students but many of the faculty in the psychology department. He was always there to give words of encouragement. He supported colleagues and students alike in their endeavors, mentoring them at all stages of their academic career development. He will be deeply missed.

In memory of M. Jeffrey Farrar, written by, Nicole Dorey, Margaret Friend, Julia Graber, Derek Montgomery and Lisa Scott, in addition to some of Jeff's own words.