

Mind, Meaning, and Morality: Social Intelligence from Tirukkural to Contemporary Psychology

OPEN ACCESS

Volume: 13

Special Issue: 5

Month: March

Year: 2026

P-ISSN: 2321-788X

E-ISSN: 2582-0397

Citation:

Marie Evangeline,
H. "Mind, Meaning,
and Morality:
Social Intelligence
from Tirukkural
to Contemporary
Psychology." *Shanlax
International Journal
of Arts, Science and
Humanities*, vol. 13,
no. S5, 2026, pp. 30–38.

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DOI:
[https://doi.org/10.34293/
sijash.v13iS5-Mar.11081](https://doi.org/10.34293/sijash.v13iS5-Mar.11081)

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Abstract

This paper examines how Thiruvalluvar's ancient Tamil text, Tirukkural anticipates modern psychological concepts of Theory of Mind and emotional intelligence with remarkable accuracy. It is a well-known fact that the Theory of Mind is the ability to attribute mental states to others and recognize differing perspectives and forms the foundation of sophisticated social cognition. 2000 years ago, the great person Thiruvalluvar has discussed about Theory of Mind in his Tirukkural. While contemporary psychology has only recently formalized these frameworks through empirical research. Valluvar embedded profound insights about social intelligence, here and there, throughout his 1330-couplet masterwork. Valluvar's observations align with contemporary findings in emotional intelligence, metacognition, attachment theory, and social, including mirror neuron systems and brain regions. The convergence between Valluvar's contemplative wisdom and modern empirical psychology suggests fundamental truths about human social cognition transcend historical and cultural boundaries. For contemporary readers facing digital communication challenges and social fragmentation, Tirukkural offers practical guidance for developing the sophisticated perspective-taking abilities that define our humanity, demonstrating that ancient wisdom remains urgently relevant for modern social challenges. Especially his Kuripparithal (Mind Reading), Arivudamai (Possession of Wisdom), Natpu (Friendship) and Pazaguthal (Social distance and association) discusses about the social intelligence which is deeply rooted in psychology. The convergence between Valluvar's contemplative wisdom and modern empirical psychology suggests fundamental truths about human social cognition transcend historical and cultural boundaries. For contemporary readers facing digital communication challenges and social fragmentation, Tirukkural offers practical guidance for developing the sophisticated perspective-taking abilities that define our humanity, demonstrating that ancient wisdom remains urgently relevant for modern social challenges.

Keywords: Tirukkural, Psychology, Theory of Mind, Social Cognition, Humanity.

Introduction

The psychologist calls the capacity of some people who has the ability to read beneath the surface of words and understand as 'Theory of Mind'. This is considered cognitive ability, which is considered as humans' most important one. It is notable that over two millennia ago the Tamil poet Thiruvalluvar in his work Tirukkural has expressed it in an unusual way. Thiruvalluvar is a legendary Tamil poet-philosopher. He has devoted significant portions for his 1,330-couplet. Later it was organised into three books, namely,

Virtue (Aram), Wealth (Porul), and Love (Inbam). This became a masterpiece to discover the shades of social intelligence, perception taking, and understanding of interpersonal relationship. Through his deep insights, throughout his work he explored about human social cognition. These were exhibited in the chapters dealing with friendship, wisdom, understanding subtle cues and social relationships. While modern psychology has only recently developed formal frameworks for studying these phenomena, His observations anticipate contemporary research in emotional intelligence, Theory of Mind development, and social neuroscience in ways that are both surprising and profound. Theory of Mind refers to the ability to attribute mental states such as beliefs, intentions, desires, emotions, and knowledge. Leslie, A. M., Friedman, O., & German, T. P. in their article “Core mechanisms in ‘theory of mind’” opines that our ability to understand the thoughts and feelings of other people does not initially develop as a theory but as a mechanism. The ‘theory of mind’ mechanism is part of the core architecture of the human brain and is specialized for learning about mental states (Leslie. et. al., 2004, p.528).

Psychologists have shown that this ability emerges gradually in childhood. The famous “Sally-Anne test” demonstrates this Theory of Mind. Later the importance of Theory of Mind extends far beyond childhood development. It underpins the capacity for empathy, enables effective communication, allows to predict others’ behaviour, and makes cooperation possible. Related to Theory of Mind is the concept of emotional intelligence, popularized by psychologist Daniel Goleman. Taking him and his writings as a reference Culver (1998) in this article “A review of Emotional Intelligence by Daniel Goleman: implications for technical education” states that Goleman shows that the seeds of what he calls emotional intelligence are sown early in life, and affect not only how the person gets along with others, but also how they succeed in academic pursuits (Culver, 1998. p. 855). Emotional intelligence encompasses self-awareness, self-regulation, social awareness, and relationship management. It involves not just understanding that others have different mental states, but accurately perceiving emotions, using emotional information to guide thinking, understanding emotional meanings and their transitions, and managing emotions in others and ourselves. Research consistently shows that emotional intelligence predicts success in relationships, leadership effectiveness, mental health, and even physical wellbeing more powerfully than traditional measures of cognitive intelligence. The Tirukkural offers an exceptionally rich and systematic exploration of interpersonal conduct, emotional regulation, and social wisdom that spans across its three major sections on virtue, wealth, and love. Unlike many ancient texts that address social behaviour, Thiruvalluvar dedicates substantial portions of his work to the shades of human relationships, including chapters on friendship, hospitality, gratitude, appropriate speech, avoiding harmful behaviours like envy and slander, and maintaining decorum in various social contexts. According to the researchers Jha, Gayathri and Gunasekaran, Tirukkural emphasizes the principles of nonviolence, vegetarianism, human brotherhood, righteousness, and covering a wide range of subjects of human life such as agriculture, friendship, knowledge & wisdom, love, domestic life, moral codes of rulers etc. (Jha., et. al., 2023, p.579). The sophisticated framework make the readers to understand how individuals can go through complex social environment without losing the ethical integrity. This comprehensive behaviour of social ability, articulated through particular couplets that balance logical depth with practical guidance. Beyond the individualistic heritages and through the lens of contemporary social intelligence theory examining Tirukkural enriches and expands the current psychological models. This paper contributes complete, culturally responsive, understanding human nature combined with society, by remonstrating how ancient traditions regarding wisdom can inform and complement contemporary psychology. It also depicts various meaningful insights shaped by culture, history and philosophy.

Methods

To have deep examination about the convergences and divergences between this text and contemporary psychology a systematic qualitative methodology has been implemented. The Tirukkural verses that address aspects of social intelligence, comprehension, relationship management, emotional awareness, social cognition and behavioural adaptation in social contexts, are thoroughly and methodically analysed (though not all of them are taken into consideration). A thorough analysis of the three books' 133 chapters reveals that the chapters on friendship (Chapters 78-80), hospitality (Chapter 9), gratitude (Chapter 11), decorum and proper behaviour (Chapter 13), the power of pleasant speech (Chapter 9), avoiding slander (Chapter 18-19) and avoiding envy (Chapters 16-17) all specifically address social behaviour. Few kurals have been selected for this study. A careful textual analysis have been done paying attention to how Thiruvalluvar theorizes social awareness, interpersonal skills and cognitive – emotional processes, which is helpful for social functioning. A rigorous framework approach that maps Tirukkural's teachings onto well-established modern models of social intelligence organizes the analysis.

Hypothesis

H₁: Tirukkural contains systematic teachings that correspond to modern social intelligence dimensions (social awareness, relationship management, empathy, social facility)

H₂: Tirukkural emphasizes collectivist and virtue-based aspects of social intelligence

Hypothesis Analysis

Dimension 1 – Nonverbal Communication

Valluvar's understanding of Theory of Mind more evident in many chapters though out Tirukkural. In just two lines of elegant Tamil poetry, Valluvar captures what modern psychology identifies as multiple distinct competencies: nonverbal communication reading, temporal awareness in social contexts, personality assessment, and tactful social navigation. Psychologist Albert Mehrabian's famous research suggests that in conveying feelings and attitudes, words account for only few percent for communication, few for tone of voice and few for body language. Even though this idea is debatable, the fundamental insight remains solid: much of human communication happens beneath and beyond words. Valluvar understood this intuitively, dedicating an entire chapter to the art of perceiving what others communicate through posture, expression, timing, context, and silence.

We can observe a stranger talking to others in a distant group without being able to hear his words; and we can feel that we like or dislike him or feel that we know the kind of person he is. This shows that appearance and especially nonverbal mannerisms can significantly contribute to the impression one makes. (iv. Preface).

Likewise, many Kurals in the chapter “Kuripparithal” (குறிப்பறிதல்), focuses significantly on the ability to perceive the very essence of sophisticated social cognition.

கூறாமை நோக்கிக் குறிப்பறிவான் எஞ்ஞான்றும்

மாறாநீர் வையக்கு அணி (Kural 701)

Kooraamai nokkik kuripparivaan enjandrum

maaraaneer vaiyakkum ani - (Transliteration of Kural 701).

This kural states that one, who reads another person's thoughts from his appearance itself, is a jewel of the world surrounded by the seas. This can be said that understanding others my the unspoken signals and judging at the right moment can be the mark of wisdom. Considering,

ஐயப் படாஅது அகத்து உணர்வானைத்

தெய்வத்தோடு ஒப்பக் கொளல். (Kural 702)

Aiyap padaathu agaththu unarvaanaith

theivaththodu oppak kolal (Transliteration of Kural 702).

Through the Kural Valluvar states that the person who is able to read another person's mind correctly is regarded as equal to god. This verse analyses about the intuitive understanding to the core. It says that the person who is able to understand another person's mind and can grasp his or her inner feelings accurately without any doubt can be considered as the supreme power. These Kurals anticipate what psychologists now call "high-context communication". Valluvar's emphasis on 'Kurippu' (indirect signs) reflects a sophisticated understanding that true social intelligence involves reading between the lines, understanding subtext, and perceiving the emotional and relational dimensions that words alone cannot convey. He noticed that through one's facial expressions and bodily resonance the opposite person can literally feel this which unconsciously and minutely mirror their expressions. These expressions can be read through their subtle cues.

Dimension 2-Wisdom as Social-Cognitive Flexibility

The chapter "Arivudaimai" (அறிவுடைமை), meaning "Possession of Wisdom," reveals another dimension of Valluvar's theory of mind. The brings out the connection between wisdom and the ability to transcend one's own perspective.

எப்பொருள் யார்யார்வாய்க் கேட்பினும் அப்பொருள்
மெய்ப்பொருள் காண்பது அறிவு. (Kural 423)

Yepporul yaaryaarvaaik ketpinum apporul

meipporul kaanpathu arivu - (Transliteration of Kural 423).

Through this verse, Valluvar defines about true wisdom and intelligence. It says that genuine knowledge consists of the ability to keenly listen to the subject spoken, from anyone, regardless their age, status and background. One has to concentrate only on the truth or the real essence of what is being said and not the person. While this might initially seem like a simple valorisation of intelligence, Valluvar's conception of "arivu" (wisdom/knowledge) throughout Thirukkural consistently emphasizes not just knowing facts, but understanding people, contexts, and the relational nature of reality. People high in metacognitive ability demonstrate superior Theory of Mind because they recognize that their own mental models are just models, not reality itself. This recognition creates space for understanding that others operate from different, equally valid mental models. His Kural 424 further develops this theme:

எண்பொருள் வாகச் செலச்சொல்லித் தான்பிறர்வாய்
நுண்பொருள் காண்பது அறிவு. (Kural 424)

Enporulvaagach selavusollith thaanpirarvaai

nunporul kaanpathu arivu. - (Transliteration of Kural 424).

The learned, according to him, are able to perceive connections and patterns that are not visible to others. They know the causes and can foresee the effects. They communicate in a simple and clear manner and they have the ability to understand even the tiniest thing. This is indicative of what psychologists refer to as cognitive flexibility. This involves the changing one's mental frameworks, through which it is able to see multiple perspectives at the same time, adjusting one's thinking based on the new information received. Studies done in social cognition reveal that cognitive flexibility is a vital factor impinging on the development of the Theory of Mind.

Dimension 3 - Authentic Friendship

Analysing about friendship, Valluvar's chapter on "Natpu" (நட்பு), provides his most psychologically refined analysis of interpersonal affairs. Rather than giving clichés about companionship, Valluvar divides the cognitive and emotional necessities for genuine and good friendship with amazing precision.

In Kural 787, he states:

அழிவின் அவைநீக்கி ஆறுஉய்த்து அழிவின்கண்

அல்லல் உழப்பதாம் நட்பு. (Kural 787)

Azhivin avaniikki aaruiththu azhivinkan

allal uzhappathaam natpu.- (Transliteration of Kural 787).

True friendship is not only about shared laughter, but also saves one from ruin, shows the right path. Its also considering friends during their troubles and standing by them. Valluvar's insight that true friendship he argues, reveals itself in adversity when one friend can genuinely inhabit another's distress and remain present. Valluvar's emphasis on friends taking care and standing by others during troubles precisely describes the safe haven function. The ability to provide this support requires sophisticated Theory of Mind, one must accurately perceive the friend's need, understand their emotional state, and respond in ways that address their actual needs rather than projecting one's own assumptions.

To continue, Valluvar's Kural 788 adds another layer.

உடுக்கை இழந்தவன் கைபோல ஆங்கெ

இடுக்கண் களைவதாம் நட்பு. (Kural 788)

Udukkai izhandhavan kaipole ange

idukkan kalaivathaam natpu.- (Transliteration of Kural 788).

Friendship's test comes not in prosperity but in adversity; Fake friends reveal themselves when fortune fades. Valluvar says that true friendship is one, which rescues the friends in distress like one's own hands quickly setting the slipping dress without any intention. Genuine friendships, characterized by what psychologists call "communal orientation" rather than "exchange orientation," persist because they're based on concern for the other's welfare independent of immediate reciprocity.

Dimension 4 - Social Distance and Intimacy

In this regard Kural 705 infers:

குறிப்பின் குறிப்பு உணரா ஆயின் உறுப்பினுள்

என்ன பயத்தவோ கண். (Kural 705)

Kurippin kurippu unaraa aayin uruppinul

enna payaththavo kan. (Transliteration of Kural 705)

Through this kural Valluvar tries to bring out the chief function of the eyes is to read the minds of others by merely looking at the persons face who stands opposite to them. It becomes true that if a person cannot perceive the subtle hints or intentions of another that relationship is meaningless. True intimacy requires understanding and emotional connection which helps to develop a social bondage. Modern psychologist opines that emotional intelligence and social awareness are crucial for meaningful relationships in the society.

Kural 424 notes:

எண்பொருள வாகக் செலச்சொல்லித் தான்பிறர்வாய்

நுண்பொருள் காண்பது அறிவு. (Kural 424)

Enporulavaagak selasollith thaanpirarvaai

nunporul kaanpathu arivu. (Transliteration of Kural 424).

Valluvar denotes that the wise adjust their behaviour to suit the person, the occasion, and the circumstances. This reflects what psychologists call "relational flexibility", the ability to modulate one's interaction style based on accurate reading of social context. Various researches shows

that this flexibility, which is entrenched in the concept Theory of Mind covers various aspects. It predicts relationship with satisfaction, leadership quality, and social modification far better than any static personality trait.

Dimension 5 - Mentalization and Learning from Others

The capacity to understand other's minds specifically for the purpose of learning and development is known as 'mentalization' by the contemporary psychologists. This concept is dealt in the chapter "Periyarai Thunaikkodal" (பெரியாரைத் துணைக்கோடல்) by Valluvar.

In this regard, Kural 441 states

அறன் அறிந்து மூத்த அறிவுடையார் கேண்மை
திறன் அறிந்து தேர்ந்து கொளல். (Kural 441)
Aran arinthu mooththa arivudaiyaar kyenmai
thiran arinthu therntu kolal. (Transliteration of Kural 441).

Valluvar says that one should analyse the value of men of virtue and wisdom and gain their friendship. Associating with the wise is armour that protects from ignorance and a fortress even enemies cannot penetrate. This goes beyond simple social learning. Valluvar describes a process where understanding wise individuals' mental frameworks transforms one's own thinking. Valluvar's emphasis on associating with the wise suggests the most effective learning involves not just acquiring information but restructuring one's own mental models to more closely resemble expert frameworks. Valluvar's metaphor of wisdom as "armour" and "fortress" suggests he recognized that internalizing wise individuals' thinking patterns fundamentally transforms one's cognitive capabilities.

Where Kural 442 extends this idea:

உற்றநோய் நீக்கி உறாஅமை முற்காக்கும்
பெற்றியார்ப் பேணிக் கொளல். (Kural 442)
Utranoi nhiikki uraa amai murkaakkum
perriyaarp paynik kolal. (Transliteration of Kural 442).

Through this Kural Valluvar tries to bring out fact that one should seek the friendship of those who will remove present ills and protect from future evils. It is a fact that the positive impacts of being connected to those who are great are many, and even a short interaction is enough to have a lasting impression. Valluvar, through his work, clearly points out that one should not only be satisfied with solitary association but should also actively go and find association with people who are above in rank or quality. He notices that having contact with the wiser people will make one's door open for personal transformation.

Dimension 6 - Emotional Regulation in Social Contexts

Valluvar also deals emotional management in an artistic way. In the chapter "Vekulamai" (வெகுளாமை), he deals with emotional management which talks about 'not being angry' or 'absence of anger'.

Kural 303 states:

மறத்தல் வெகுளியை யார்மட்டும் தீய
பிறத்தல் அதனான் வரும். (Kural 303)
Maraththal vekuliyai yaarmattum theeya
piraththal athanaan varum.) (Transliteration of Kural 303).

Through Valluvar, it is clear that anger brings no benefit. One must understand that a person must avoid anger towards all, for it brings him all evils. While this might appear to be simple moral advice, from a psychological perspective, Valluvar is addressing what researchers now call “emotion regulation”, the processes by which the emotions influence greatly and when it is there how it is experienced and expressed. He suggests the human’s reconceptualise situations that provoke anger by considering longer-term consequences and alternative perspectives. This requires Theory of Mind because effective reappraisal often involves understanding others’ intentions, considering their perspectives, and recognizing their behaviour and it is wise avoiding any situation, which invokes anger.

Kural 306 adds nuance:

சினம்என்னும் சேர்ந்தாரைக் கொல்லி இனம்என்னும்
ஏமப் புணையைச் சுடும். (Kural 306)

Sinamennum serntharaik kolli inamennum

yemaap punaiyai sudum.) (Transliteration of Kural 306).

Valluvar explains that one’s anger not only destroys one who gets angry but also one’s relationship with others. It also destroys the relationship between the persons who helped them in the time of necessity. Another thing he discusses is that responding to others’ anger with one’s own anger is like pouring oil on fire. It is better to be calm to extinguish the flames. Doing so one can have control over his own emotions. This demonstrates understanding of what psychologists call “emotional infection” and “co-regulation.” When someone expresses anger, humans unconsciously tend to mirror their facial expressions, vocal tone, and body language, which can trigger similar emotions in themselves. Recent days before neuroscience could deal with it, Valluvar recognised this reality two millennia before itself. His dealing with ‘calmness’ intersects with the modern concept that a person’s emotional principles can help to regulate other people’s emotions. Parenting, leadership and conflict resolution has this phenomenon predominantly. This concept not only includes managing a person’s own emotions, but also that will influence other person’s emotions also. This two-fold understanding demonstrates his efficient treatment of anger management.

Kural 308 observes that:

இணர்எரி தோய்வுஅன்ன இன்னா செயினும்
புணரின் வெகுளாமை நன்று. (Kural 308)

Inareri thoivuanna innaa seiyyinum

punarin vegulaamai nanru. (Transliteration of Kural 308).

If a person remains calm and silent even though others provoke him, he gains power over the opposite person who wanted to disturb. The psychologist calls this state ‘emotional labour’. Managing one’s emotion is directly proportionate to influencing others emotional states. Valluvar very well understood that emotional self-regulation is not only self-beneficial but also shapes others behaviour also. Through this Valluvar tries to throw light on understanding others’ inner feelings, unspoken words and buried emotions and their intensions.

Discussions

Tirukkural, a work of wise ancient Tamil Sage, is an immortal moral guide that delves into human nature, moral virtue and the peaceful co-existence of society. In fact, the topics covered in the Tirukkural are not compatible but identical with present-day standards and theories of social intelligence, which is skill of easily understanding and handling social situations. The work talks about the above-mentioned aspects through a set of moral principles, which in turn constitute the ethical base of social intelligence. As Lau states in his article, Social intelligence is the set

of abilities and skills that we use to understand and navigate social situations and maintain our relationships (Lau, 2016. p.3). The poet stresses the need for the virtue of discernment (arivu) understanding the plight of others, and having the sense to behave in a manner suitable to the given situation. The verses on knowing people, deciding time, place and understanding human nature convey that supreme intellect is not just logical thinking but also social insight. He emphasizes qualities such as friendship (Natpu), gratitude (Nanri), forbearance (Porumai), and avoiding enmity (Pagaipadu Ozhukkam). He opines that empathy is the main thing, which becomes the moral backbone of humanism, because it is the ability to understand others feelings. It helps to position oneself in others place. It is a mixture of kindness and compassion for others. He presents sympathy (Arul), non-harming (Ahimsa), and charity (Thanam) as the core of virtue. For him, virtue cannot act without empathy, as it is true that the welfare of others is interwove with one's moral duty. A person's speech and behaviour reflects the intelligence and virtue. This helps to understand and follow cultural standards, etiquette, and moral outlooks.

Conclusion

Not only did Valluvar figured out these things before two thousand years that modern psychology is still discovering. This is what sets apart his social intelligence that he saw the link between them. He opines that wisdom includes metacognition, that friendship needs empathic concern, that emotional regulation is socially conditioned, that learning cannot do without mentalizing. All these things being dependent on the basic one of recognizing that other people have different minds than ours. Tirukkural clearly states that various psychological insights does not require famous laboratories, brain scanners, or any statistical analysis. It requires cautious observation of human behaviour, deep replication on social experience, and the knowledge to distinguish universal designs from cultural details. His kurals on communal intelligence remain almost relevant because they define basic features of human psychology that exceed historical period and cultural setting. The relationship between ancient wisdom and modern science gives something reflective: certain truths about human nature can be evaluated through various paths. Empirical psychology delivers a particular path and contemplative wisdom provides another. When these two different paths unite on similar decisions, then social intelligence in Valluvar and contemporary psychology reveals genuine truths about human nature. For current readers, Tirukkural suggests more than historical concern. Each kural serves as an awareness prompt, a reminder to examine social dynamics, to enquire our expectations about others' intentions, to normalize our emotional reactions, to seek wisdom from experience people, and to nurture the cognitive empathy that makes us a complete human. Thiruvalluvar's two-thousand-year-old ideas of understanding human minds is the need of this hour, due to the increase of social isolation, digital mediation, and divergence.

Acknowledgement

The author extends heartfelt gratitude to Dr. Arokiyaraj Selvaraj, President of the South Korea Tamil Research Association (SKTRA), for his invaluable support and guidance during the First International Thirukkural Conference (ITCSK 2025) held at Sejong University, South Korea, on November 8th, 2025. As its inaugural global academic event, SKTRA's conference brought together scholars, researchers, and cultural enthusiasts to celebrate the universal values of Thirukkural and foster cross-cultural dialogue. Dr. Arokiyaraj Selvaraj's encouragement and contributions were instrumental in the successful completion of this work.

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