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Mind-reading ability: Beliefs and performance☆

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Abstract

Every adult possesses and uses to a various extent, a powerful tool, a theory of mind. The ability to recognize emotions, intentions, and thoughts of others is an important component of social competence. The use of personality questionnaires implies that people are aware of their personality traits, experienced emotions, values, and attitudes. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that a normal adult is aware of his or her mind-reading abilities and can estimate, in relation to the others, how good he or she is at judging other person's traits, states of mind, emotions, and intentions. In this study we have demonstrated that a person's beliefs about their own mind-reading ability forms a single and unitary dimension. If a person believes that he or she is competent in forming judgments about another person's personality traits then he or she has a relatively high opinion of their abilities to read another person's thoughts and emotions. However, the results of our research show that the self-reported mind-reading ability was not correlated with actual performance. Those who believe that they are good at reading others' minds are generally neither (1) significantly better than the others in recognition of emotions expressed in face or speech, nor (2) superior in their estimation of the personality traits of a stranger. The self-reported mind-reading ability was correlated with personality traits but not with psychometrically measured intelligence. On the contrary, the actual mind-reading performance was correlated with IQ scores. It is discussed why individuals are relatively accurate in estimation of their own personality but lack metaknowledge about their mind-reading abilities.
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1. Introduction

All normal human adults and perhaps some talented apes (Premack & Woodruff, 1978) possess and use a powerful tool—a theory of mind (Flavell, 1999). The theory of mind is normally viewed as a competence, a specific capacity of the mind geared to understand ourselves and others in terms of mental states. The theory of mind provides the owners of this capacity with the ability to establish a relationship between external states (expressions, gestures, signals, etc.) and internal states of mind. The most important consequence of this relationship is a capacity to predict behavior of other individuals in various social settings. The capacity to recognize emotions, intentions, and thoughts of others, can be seen as an important ingredient of a broader set of abilities that has been called social competence or intelligence. Like many other skills, very young children apparently lack this ability and it takes at least a couple of years before they become "mind readers,"[1] both of their own as well as others (Gopnik, 1993; Gopnik & Meltzoff, 1997). Pathological processes can impede the development of mind-reading ability. It was proposed, for example, that the central component of autism is a specific deficit in "mind reading," not an impairment of general cognitive abilities (Baron-Cohen, 1995).

Natural languages provide, beside the description of mental states, an extensive set of words that the members of a language-speaking community have invented to describe personality traits they find important (Goldberg, 1993). Only a few scholars still have a pessimistic view that personality attributes, expressed in adjectives or personality questionnaire items, exist solely in the head of the person who uses them, not in the person one tries to characterize. Many theories, like psychoanalysis for instance, deny the human ability to perceive veridically the personality traits of our friends, our acquaintances and ourselves, and therefore, discredit self-reports as a reliable source of data. On the contrary, the use of personality questionnaires generally implies that, most of the time, people are aware of their psychological make-up including their lasting tendencies and dispositions to behave and act in a certain manner (McCrae & Costa, 1996). Empirically grounded personality psychology is based on an assumption that personality is a relatively stable and a coherent structure residing within a person and in that sense is viewed as a "concrete entity" that, to a certain extent, is publicly accessible. This structure, however, is not directly visible,

[1] In colloquial English, a "mind reader" is someone who "professes or is held to be able to perceive another's thought without normal means of communication" (Merriam-Webster OnLine; http://www.m-w.com) and "mind reading" is defined as "guessing or knowing by intuition what somebody is thinking" (Hornby, 1987, p. 537). In this paper, however, following the works by several other authors (e.g., Baron-Cohen, 1994; Baron-Cohen, 1995; Lee, Eskritt, Symons, & Muir, 1998), we decided to use the term "mind reading" in a more general sense denoting the general ability to determine another individual's state of mind and to recognize another's thoughts, intentions, emotions, and personality characteristics.

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