



Egocentrism, allocentrism, and Asperger syndrome

Uta Frith*, Frederique de Vignemont

Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience, University College London, UK

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Abstract

In this paper, we attempt to make a distinction between egocentrism and allocentrism in social cognition, based on the distinction that is made in visuo-spatial perception. We propose that it makes a difference to mentalizing whether the other person can be understood using an egocentric (“you”) or an allocentric (“he/she/they”) stance. Within an egocentric stance, the other person is represented in relation to the self. By contrast, within an allocentric stance, the existence or mental state of the other person needs to be represented as independent from the self. We suggest here that people with Asperger syndrome suffer from a disconnection between a strong naïve egocentric stance and a highly abstract allocentric stance. We argue that the currently used distinction between first-person and third-person perspective-taking is orthogonal to the distinction between an egocentric and an allocentric stance and therefore cannot serve as a critical test of allocentrism.

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1. Introduction

Bernard was a precocious child. He invented complicated games that the other children did not understand and he had fits of rage when they refused to play. At school, Bernard was never the

* Corresponding author

E-mail address: u.frith@ucl.ac.uk (U. Frith).

one selected for a team and he found this humiliating. His teachers appreciated his high intelligence but found that he was quite unable to work with others in a group. He learned in his own way, refusing to fit in with the syllabus.

When he was an adolescent he became obsessed with a particular classmate who was highly popular. He was surprised that this boy made an official complaint when he had copied every detail of his attire. He said he just wanted to be equally popular. Bernard increasingly showed signs of acute anxiety and was finally referred to a specialist, who diagnosed him as having Asperger syndrome. The diagnosis was very important to him because, according to Bernard, he now understood why he was so different and why he had so many problems with what he referred to as the social rules.

He avidly reads books and watches documentaries that are relevant to his areas of interest, but he never reads novels or watches TV drama, which he claims are not worth the bother and a waste of time. He lives with his parents but complains about having to fit in with their rules. When his mother had to go to hospital, he was angry that his daily routine was ruined. On the other hand, when one day she had a gastric upset and could only sip weak tea, Bernard brought her a big bag of fish and chips—to cheer her up. His mother accepts his blatant egocentrism as a part of his condition and she takes it with a sense of humour. She laughingly related that Bernard's greatest wish is to live alone in a big house served by a large number of robots.

This vignette gives an impression of the limited, but by no means absent social competence of a not untypical individual with Asperger syndrome. In current clinical practice Asperger syndrome is still a controversial diagnosis, but it tends to be most often used for the milder forms of autistic disorder combined with high verbal ability (Frith, 2004; Macintosh & Dissanayake, 2004). In the following we will use the abbreviation AS to refer to Asperger syndrome. Since research has not succeeded in delineating clear-cut differences between the cognitive characteristics of high-functioning adults with autism and those with Asperger syndrome, our AS category includes both.

For our present purposes we consider AS individuals with normal or superior intellectual ability who show the following features: difficulty in reciprocal social interaction, communication impairments, a lack of flexibility with obsessive tendencies, and a single-minded pursuit of narrow interests. Here we focus exclusively on the social impairment. We believe that a deeper analysis of this impairment is needed than has hitherto been provided by the notion of a lack of “theory of mind,” also known as mindblindness or mentalizing failure (e.g., Baron-Cohen, 1995; Frith, 2001; Happé et al., 1996).

AS individuals are often able to pass standard theory of mind tests, yet their capacity to mentalize seems fragile. Could it be that their successful mentalizing is limited by a high degree of egocentrism? Indeed, Asperger (1944) described the children he identified as “egocentric in the extreme.” Later on in this paper we will give specific examples to illustrate the type of egocentrism seen in AS. First, however, we will attempt to make a distinction between egocentrism and allocentrism.

2. Different roles and different stances

Dennett (1987) introduced the notion of the intentional stance, which can be defined as a strategy for understanding an entity's behaviour by treating it as if it were a rational agent. We will not

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