

Abstract

In the current literature, there are mixed evidences regarding the automaticity of theory of mind. Three studies were conducted to further investigate the question of whether adults do automatically take into account others' mental states in understanding behavior, and under what circumstances would the deployment of theory of mind be enhanced.

In study 1, replication of Wertz and German's (2007) study on belief-desire reasoning was conducted to collect qualitative feedback on improving the experimental design. Study 2 and study 3 were extension of the original Wertz and German's (2007) study. Through presenting different mixes of false belief and true belief stories to different groups of participants, study 2 provided evidence that people's performance on belief-desire reasoning would be affected by the predominant mental state that the environment called for in general, instead of what was particularly entailed in a single incident. Study 3 showed that highlighting contextual cues related to mental states, such as deception and initial desire, could reduce the error in making mental-states attribution for others' behaviour. The results of these studies are consistent with the argument that theory of mind is strategic in nature and requires devotion of mental resources, but inconsistent with the Theory of Mind Mechanism model arguing for an automatic theory of mind mechanism.