

Shared Emotions and Social Understanding

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Challenging both Theory Theory and Simulation Theory, recent phenomenologically-motivated approaches to social cognition (e.g., Gallagher 2008; Gallagher and Zahavi 2008) have argued for the centrality of direct perception and affective attunement (i.e., shared emotions) in shaping social understanding. Much of the ensuing discussion has focused on primacy of the former; the role of the latter has not received the same level of attention. This talk looks at the role of shared emotions in driving basic forms of social understanding. Drawing upon Merleau-Ponty's essay, "The Child's Relation with Others" as well as various strands of work in developmental psychology, the talk investigates both (1) how we ought to understand the notion of "shared emotions" in this context, and (2) how shared emotions can be said to both ground and inform higher-level "mentalizing" processes of social understanding.

References:

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Emotion recognition as pattern recognition

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Emotion recognition is a candidate for intuitive, non-inferential understanding of others: We can intuitively recognize another person's emotions, if these emotions are embodied by facial expressions or other bodily or behavioral cues. Recognition of emotional facial expressions has been described as pattern classification in humans and machines (Buck 1984). The facial expressions are taken as natural signs for a limited set of „basic emotions“ (Ekman 1972). However, for a more fine-grained classification, we have to classify more complex emotion patterns. I will extend the idea of pattern recognition to emotions in general; they can be characterized as a patterned response to the environment. Their classification is not always an intuitive, non-inferential process. By engaging critically with Shaun Gallagher's Interaction Theory of understanding others (Gallagher 2001, Gallagher & Hutto 2008), I will introduce an account of intuitive and inferential forms of emotion recognition.

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Effects of mimicry and facial feedback processes in understanding other's emotions

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In the present presentation, I will focus on mimicry and facial feedback processes in understanding the emotions of others. First, I will explain how mimicry and facial feedback mechanisms work and present studies showing the consequences of these processes. More specifically, I will present evidence that mimicry leads to more emotional attunement between people and increases feelings of understanding. Secondly, I will discuss the effects of mimicry and facial feedback in individuals who have impaired abilities to understand the emotions of others (individuals with Autistic Spectrum Disorders).

References:

- Stel, M. & Vonk, R. (2010). Mimicry in social interaction: Benefits for mimickers, mimicked and their interaction. *British Journal of Psychology*, 101, 311-323.
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