Henning Brand

On Strategies in Person Perception – Predicting Others by Mental Simulation or Theory?

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About the Author

Henning Brand was born 1970 in Lemgo/Germany. Studied music at the Amsterdamse Hogeschool voor de Kunsten/Netherlands. He taught music at the Universität Bielefeld from 1996-2001. From 1995-1999 studied psychology and sociology at the Universität Bielefeld/Germany. After graduation in 1999 he became assisstant lecturer in social psychology at the Universität Koblenz-Landau. The present publication was accepted as doctoral dissertation in social psychology by the Department of Psychology at the Universität Koblenz-Landau/Campus Landau.

Summary

Common sense psychology is used in everyday life to understand and predict other people's behavior. As for the nature of this folk psychology, it is commonly held that it consists of naïve theories and therefore is rule-based, although some authors assume that such rules are applied in terms of an implicit psychology. As an alternative perspective on predicting others, mental simulation is discussed as a process by which hypothetical situations are explored by "putting oneself in the other's shoes" and using one's reactions to such situations as a means for predicting others. It is argued that mental simulation is a second force in person perception. Predicting others hence can be achieved by means of theory or by mental simulation. Addressing the issue of how these two strategies of person perception can be distinguished, existing research paradigms are presented and discussed. In contrast to these paradigms, it is argued that mental simulation may trigger emotional reactions that serve as information when predicting others, whereas in case of theory use, prediction is independent of such reactions. A series of experiments about predicting a target's surprise is then presented. The evidence from these experiments suggests a bias induced by one's own emotional reactions when predicting others. At the same time, subjects correct for this bias by using information about the target's mental states. In the absence of information, mental simulation is applied as a strategy resulting in accurate prediction of target's behavior whereas in the presence of information, theory is applied resulting in biased prediction in terms of underestimating target's surprise. Finally, an experiment is presented in which subjects accurately predicted others by theory, but independent of their own reactions. Implications for research in social psychology are discussed with special regard to emotion.

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I would finally recommend the Florence Foster Jenkins Institute for the Simulation of Music of which being a founding member years ago at first raised my interest in the issue of simulation.

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