

Bifocalism is in the eye of the beholder: Social learning as a developmental response to the accuracy of others' mentalizing

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Abstract

The commentary argues the case for developmental psychopathology in understanding social learning. Informed by work on “epistemic disruption”, we have described difficulties with social learning associated with many forms of psychopathology. Epistemic disruption manifests in an inability to move between innovation and conformity, and arises from poor mentalizing, which generates difficulties in identifying social cues that trigger the correct stance.

Main Text

Bifocal Stance Theory is cogently positioned as a transdisciplinary integrative approach to explaining the flexibility with which humans move between imitation and innovation in order to maximise opportunities for social learning. Here, we seek to extend the transdisciplinary range to hold an emphatic place for developmental psychopathology. Theorists of social cognition tend to use a model of normatively archetypal functioning but we suggest that such platonic idealism in relation to human social cognition forms a missed opportunity, for two reasons: a) psychopathological functioning can illuminate processes as they become distorted and, b) social cognition does not take place in the platonic abstraction – rather ruptures, misattunements and the socially nested task of achieving joint attention are the stuff of higher order cognition.

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We will begin with our first point, what we can learn from psychopathology. Informed by clinical thinking on “epistemic petrification”, we have described particular difficulties with flexible social learning that are associated with certain forms of psychopathology, most centrally, borderline personality disorder (Fonagy, Luyten, & Allison, 2015). It has been observed that individuals with this diagnosis tend to be particularly vulnerable to epistemic disruption, which arises out of a poor capacity for mentalizing and generates breakdowns in social communication and learning. Mentalizing – the ability to understand actions as underpinned by mental states, in both other people and the self – may be essential in making the effective use of the bifocal stance possible. Appropriate switches in stance depend on being able to make use of social cues about what is being demonstrated or communicated. Difficulties in mentalizing on the self-other dimension (Fonagy & Luyten, 2009), can lead to either or both: a) my imagined image of myself in the world, and b) the image of myself and the world that I imagine my “teacher” to hold of me, becoming disrupted or distorted. As a result, I may resort to slavish imitation (perhaps because my image of myself is so diffuse that any communication about what I should do and who I am in the world is accepted) or unmoored innovation (perhaps because I cannot recognise myself as accurately recognised in my communicator's image of me and it is better to work things out instrumentally on my own than trust their view about how to navigate the world) (Fonagy, Allison, & Campbell, 2019). Where mental disorder is indicated, an individual is stuck in one position or another – excessive imagination is as pathological as excessive copying when it comes to social adaptation. We would suggest that what we have identified as epistemic trust, mistrust and credulity (Campbell et al., 2021) might manifest as difficulties in adopting a flexible bifocal stance. Some individuals might be stuck in an imitative mode or in an instrumental mode,

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others may oscillate between the two but with insufficient discrimination – we have described this as the epistemic dilemma which individuals with some forms of personality disorder experience. In such a state, individuals veer between excessive epistemic credulity (imitation) and a repudiation of the content of others' minds (which might be understood as a form of unmoored innovation). We have conceptualised a number of forms of psychopathology as understandable in terms of such epistemic disruption (Fonagy et al., 2021).

Where our model diverges from Jagiello and Hayes is in our emphasis on the interactional nature of the processes and the significance of the quality of communication. The theory of epistemic trust, in the form that we have proposed, is based on developmental psychopathology. Social learning first takes place in the context of early caregiving relationships. The biological predisposition of the caregiver to respond contingently to the infant's expressive displays creates the foundation for the infant to acquire further knowledge from that individual. During what we have termed "marked mirroring interactions", the attachment figure will "mark" referential emotion displays to signal the generalizability of knowledge and effectively to instruct the infant about the infant's subjective experience (Fonagy, Gergely, Jurist, & Target, 2002; Fonagy & Target, 2007; Gergely & Watson, 1996). "Marking" by the caregiver as part of "good enough" mirroring serves as ostensive cues that enable a child to feel recognized as a subjective, agentive self, which in turn reinforces epistemic trust, optimising the effectiveness of social transmission of knowledge. Being able to appropriately adjust one's bifocal stance between imitative and instrumental learning to specific contexts, we suggest, requires both epistemic trust and epistemic agency that are a) a developmental achievement, incubated by particular social experiences, and b) necessarily

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subject to being closed off in response to social interaction that suggests that such cooperative learning is not self-protective (Sperber et al., 2010). The authors cite Watson-Jones' experiment of social copying in children, which found that children who were first exposed to social exclusion by their in-group in a virtual ball-tossing game showed the highest fidelity in copying a causally opaque action, compared to both those who were included by their in-group and those who were rejected or included by an out-group. Developmental literature indicates that children are more likely to protest norm violation when it is committed by an in-group rather than an out-group member. We also know that individuals with BPD, who are prone to epistemic credulity (social copying), also tend to show heightened sensitivity to social rejection (Hanegraaf, van Baal, Hohwy, & Verdejo-Garcia, 2021); effect sizes across studies are large with BPD patients more likely to be reporting feelings of exclusion even in social inclusion conditions (e.g. Brown et al., 2017).

This emphasis on the role of the quality of the relationship between the source of knowledge and the learner takes us to our second point – that higher order social cognition cannot be understood as an abstraction. This position has been influenced by recent work on the origins and functions of some of the characteristics which we identify as central to our identity as a species as being inherently social. Mahr and Csibra (2017), for example, have argued that episodic *memory* principally functions to enable social communication. Memories of personal experience provide us with a rationale for our behaviour and locate us in relation to our obligations and commitments with others. Memories of interpersonal encounters tell us who we can rely on and who we should treat with caution. Similarly, Mercier and Sperber (2017) have argued that the human capacity for *reason* is primarily social, that the function of logic

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and reason is to enable us to cooperate, negotiate and agree social terms with others – reasonings allows us to negotiate our social terms with others, providing the basis for cooperation and the regulation of complex social relationships (Mercier & Sperber, 2017). The embedding of social cognition in the social environment makes it inseparably linked to its function and dysfunctions.

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