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## Mind-shaping and social cognition: implications for debates about mental representation

There are two paradigms for interpreting folk-psychological practices. Proponents of the ‘mind-reading’ approach argue that the successful recognition and attribution of others’ intentional states is underwritten by a process of mental representation—often (but not always) this involves some form of meta-representation (cf. Leslie & Frith 1987; Gopnik & Astington 1988; Sterelny 1998). By contrast, proponents of ‘mind-shaping’ (Zawidzki 2013; see also McGeer (2015)) argue that feats of strategic coordination and interpersonal understanding depend not upon the explicit attribution of propositional attitudes via meta-representations, but upon processes of regulative enculturation that utilize distributed and readily available cognitive technologies.

In short, the key difference between mind-reading and mind-shaping hypotheses is that where mind-reading tries to explain how one individual can ‘know’ the intentional state of another by relying on their own cognitive resources, mind-shaping suggests that social-cognition is an active process. Moreover, it suggests that many socio-cognitive practices evolved *prior* to the ability of humans to meta-represent. In this way, the mind-shaping approach does not fall prey to the same epistemic problems that have plagued neo-Cartesian accounts of mind-reading found throughout the ‘theory of mind’ literature (cf. Davies & Stone 1995; Carruthers & Smith 1996).

Nevertheless, many questions abound concerning which paradigm better explains the foundations of folk-psychological practice. For instance, assuming that mind-shaping hypotheses are correct about the evolution of social-cognition, it would seem that meta-representations are not necessary to explain how people successfully coordinate and derive meaning from their actions. According to Zawidzi (2013) mind-reading hypotheses are (mostly) superfluous given that complex and recursive reasoning is a rare occurrence in daily life—very few actions require the attribution of propositional attitudes. But this conclusion supposes that early humans did in rely on more direct forms of social-cognition, and further, that complex and recursive reasoning doesn’t play an important role in strategic reasoning today.

In what follows, I argue that the mind-shaping approach is limited as an explanatory theory of social-cognition: this is because (1) it does not discriminate what is uniquely false about different theories of mental representation in the mind-reading literature; (2) It identifies only prototypical forms of social-cognition that did not depend on did not rely on meta-representations; and (3) It doesn’t rule out that meta-representational abilities emerged for other purposes, thereby enabling abstract and counter-factual reasoning we utilize today. To motivate each of these points I draw upon interdisciplinary studies of strategic reasoning (i.e. from experimental economics, developmental psychology, and cognitive neuroscience) to identify where mind-shaping hypotheses out-perform mind-reading ones; as such, the paper does not undermine the mind-shaping approach but refines its scope of explanation.

### References

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