

Writing the Mental States of Others

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A common theme of our in-class discussions on empathy has been the self/other distinction. That is, if I am able to know about you through some empathic/empathetic process, and have therefore have access to your internal mental states, how do I know that they are not my own mental states? How do I keep your self separate from my self? Alternatively conceived, it has been argued that we use the same psychophysical resources to understand the motions of another as we use to make our own motor plans; in this case, how do I know that the actions of another are not actually my actions? Again, how do I keep your self separate from my self?

This question of keeping one's self separate from the self of another is relevant also to the question of whether one can shape the internal mental state of another. The focus of my paper is to address the question of whether we can somehow write someone else's mental state, in the context of empathy allowing us to read the inner mental states of another. It is my position that it is possible to write the mental state of another; to argue this position, I will explicate what I argue are three means with which one can write the mental state of another; by controlling his environment, by using the principle of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), and by changing one's own mental state and creating in her an empathic response.

To demonstrate our capacity to write the mental state of another, it is first necessary to make explicit a set of conditions that would lead us to believe that the internal state of another really has been written by us. That is, simply enacting a change in another's mental state seems insufficient; the change in the other's state should be intentional and predictable. It could not be said that we have written another's mental state simply if some set of our actions caused a change in their mental state. Instead, further criteria of intentionality and predictability need to be included; the change in mental state in the other needs to be intentional on our part, and needs to

be toward some end mental state that is of our design. By stipulating this definition, the criticism that we are not really writing the state of another but changing it to something else arbitrarily can be addressed by definition.

One means by which it is possible to write the internal mental state of another is by changing his environmental conditions systematically to affect his inner state. This idea is best expressed with the idea of a movie theatre. If we place an individual in front of a movie screen, then with control over what film we show him, we can say (with some certainty) that we can write his mental state, provided we know something about how they will react to different stimuli. Suppose we know that an individual likes and appreciates comedy movies, is scared by horror movies, and finds documentaries boring. If we place him in our movie theatre, we have some measure of control over his mental state depending on which movie we choose to show him. If we show him a comedy, we can predict and realize a different mental state within him than if we show him a horror film. In essence, by shaping someone's environment, we are given some measure of control over his mental state.

A second means by which I argue it is possible to write the mental state of another is with the principle of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). Festinger describes cognitive dissonance as the (unpleasant) feeling caused by holding two conflicting ideas simultaneously, or by acting in a way that is contrary to a consciously-held idea. In response to this dissonance, he argues, people are motivated to change either their behaviours or attitudes to reduce dissonance. We could use the principle of cognitive dissonance to write the mental state of another by controlling his environment or body such that he is induced to act in a specific way, however is unaware of our influence on his action. With no alternative explanation for an uncharacteristic or unintentional action, an individual would feel dissonance between his behaviour and beliefs, and

so would come to attribute that action to a belief in himself that he need not necessarily possess in actuality. In this way, providing we can ensure that there is a predictable correlation between the actions we influence an individual to perform and the mental state that he would come to possess to reduce the resultant cognitive dissonance, we can write another's mental state.

A third means by which we can write the mental state of another is using empathetic response. It stands to reason that if I know an individual will have a predictable empathetic response to my inner mental state, I can write her mental state by controlling the mental state I possess (or appear to possess). For example, if I know that an individual will feel sad if she sees and empathizes with me, I can write her mental state by evincing the feeling of sadness in myself.

It is important to also address some possible limitations on our ability to write the inner mental states of others. In the first means I outlined, our ability to write another's mental state is modulated by our ability to predict how he will react to a given environmental stimulus. For example, although we might show him a horror movie with the intention of evoking a fear response, he might react unpredictably and find the movie humorous instead of frightening. In the second means I outlined, our ability to write another's mental state is modulated by how well we can induce him to act as we desire, and on the predictability of the resolution of his resulting cognitive dissonance. In the third means I outlined, our ability to write another's mental state is modulated by how predictable her empathetic response is to the evinced inner states of others.

Having made the argument that it is possible to write another's mental state, the question of why, evolutionarily speaking, this could be an adaptive arises. Intuitively, it would seem a vulnerability for me to be open to others writing my mental states. Put in context with the adaptive nature of empathy however, I argue that being open to others writing one's mental state

could be adaptive.

Empathy allows us to understand the inner mental states of others. This is adaptive because it allows us to understand how another is feeling, and correspondingly, how he is likely to act. That is, if I can tell that you are feeling angry, it is adaptive for me to be able to act based on that information (with caution and temperance, for example) to avoid a mutually detrimental negative interaction. Oppositely, in a friendship situation, it is adaptive for me to be able to read the positive mental state of another, in order to move toward a mutually beneficial positive interaction. In this way, it seems possible there to be adaptive benefits to both me being able to read your mental states, and you being able to communicate your mental states to me with empathy.

Conversely, it could also be adaptive for me to be able to both write the mental states of others and to have my own mental states written by others. If I feel empathy for another who has a negative mental state, then my empathic response will result in me feeling badly for him. In this case, it becomes adaptive for me to be able to write a more positive mental state in him to alleviate what negative empathetic feelings I have, as well as to improve his mental state (as I assume that it could be in my benefit for those around me to be feeling positively). It could be beneficial also for others to be able to write my mental state also, for similar reasons. For example, in a survival scenario it could be in my best interest to have my mental state written by an empathic understanding of fear in another, and thereby be alerted to a fear-eliciting danger.

It seems clear that it is possible to write the mental state of another, either by controlling her environment, applying the principle of cognitive dissonance, or evincing a feeling to elicit a desired empathic response. Furthermore, this possibility appears to be adaptive, insofar as it is generally in the best interests of myself and others to be able to read and write each other's inner

mental states.

References

Festinger, L. (1957). *A theory of cognitive dissonance*. Stanford University Press.

Question 1:

I Look Through Myself Into You