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Can Certain Movies Make Us Understand People Better?

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Question Method Discussion

Is it possible to improve a person's ability to "mind read?"

Background

- Theory of Mind (ToM) is a person's ability to "mind read," that is, understand others' thoughts and emotions.
- Children acquire ToM at an early age and continue to use it throughout their life (e.g., Wellman, Cross, & Watson, 2001).
- Correlational research has found that exposure to storybooks and movies predicted better ToM development in preschoolers (e.g., Mar, Tackett, & Moore, 2013)
- Kidd and Castano (2013) found that reading a passage of literary fiction improved performance on ToM tasks in adults (see Figure 1).
- Our study was intended to replicate Kidd and Castano, using movie clips as the form of media rather than books.

Figure 1: Kidd and Castano (2013) (Exp. 5)



$F(2,352)=3.10, p = 0.04$

Participants (N=101) were randomly assigned to watch a 2-4-min clip from one of the following conditions:



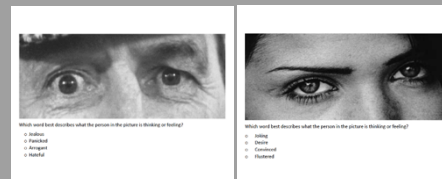
Popular Movies

Non-Human Movie

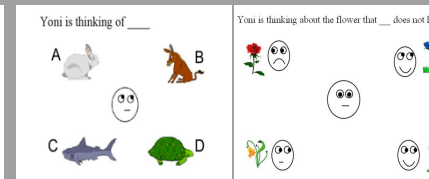
Academy Award© Movies

Then, Theory of Mind was tested with the following two tasks (counterbalanced for order):

Reading the Mind in the Eyes Test (RMET)

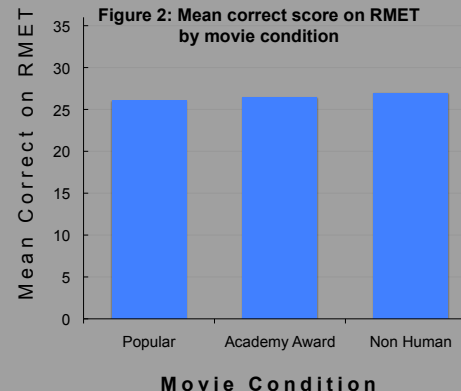


Yoni Task



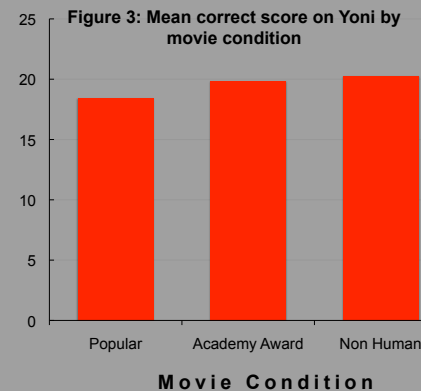
Results

Figure 2: Mean correct score on RMET by movie condition



$F(2,98)=0.222, p = 0.801, n.s.$

Figure 3: Mean correct score on Yoni by movie condition



$F(2,96)= 1.813, p = 0.169, n.s.$

- In the present study, different movie genres did not improve ToM.
- These results are different from Kidd and Castano (2013). They showed that reading from literary fiction improved ToM, though their effect size was small.
- Next steps to examine whether ToM can be improved could include:
 - a study that manipulates the complexity of the interaction in the movie clip
 - a study that shows longer movies
 - a study that recruits individuals with lower ToM scores
- We will continue to investigate the larger questions, that is, whether and how we can improve one's understanding of others. Such research has implications for bullying, marital satisfaction, and career satisfaction.

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