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Can Certain Movies Make Us Understand People Better?

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Can Certain Movies Make Us Understand People Better?
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Question
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)

Method
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
- Figure 3: Mean correct score on Yoni by movie condition

Discussion
- 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.

References

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