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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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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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Movie Condition</th>
<th>Popular</th>
<th>Academy Award</th>
<th>Non-Human</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean Correct on RMET</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Popular Fiction</td>
<td>20.25</td>
<td>21.50</td>
<td>23.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literary Fiction</td>
<td>22.50</td>
<td>23.75</td>
<td>25.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Reading</td>
<td>24.25</td>
<td>25.50</td>
<td>27.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

  \[ F(2,352)=3.10, p = 0.04 \]

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Movie Condition</th>
<th>Popular</th>
<th>Academy Award</th>
<th>Non-Human</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean Correct on Yoni</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Popular</td>
<td>20.00</td>
<td>21.50</td>
<td>23.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academy Award</td>
<td>22.00</td>
<td>23.50</td>
<td>25.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Human</td>
<td>24.00</td>
<td>25.50</td>
<td>27.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

  \[ F(2,96)=1.813, p = 0.169, \text{n.s.} \]

**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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