Folk but not dumb: for a more bio-socially realistic study of social cognition

"To understand other people is a task which does
not come to an end" (Murdoch 1959, p. 269).
There is, so far, no human group that doesn't explain behaviour by imputing
beliefs and desires to the behaviour.
(And if an anthropologist claimed to have found such a group, I wouldn't believe him.)
(Fodor 1989, p. 132).

General presentation of the project and state of the art

In the philosophical environment, research on human and animal social cognition has mostly focused on the study of mindreading[1], or the cognitive ability to attribute to other mental states such as desires and beliefs, in order to explain or predict their behavior. Between the 1970s and mid-2000s, the debate on mindreading saw two approaches as main actors: theory-theory and simulationism (Lavelle, 2019). After years of very heated debates, several scholars have come to propose some hybrid version between theory-theory and simulationism (e.g. Goldman, 2006).

This focus on the attribution of beliefs and desires to explain and predict the behavior of others can also be observed in the empirical literature, particularly in developmental psychology, where the myriad of variants of the false belief task dominated the debate for several decades[2]. Given the focus on the attribution of propositional attitudes (and beliefs in particular), it was thought that an individual could be considered a true popular psychologist only if he was able to attribute incorrect beliefs (different from his own) to other individuals.

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[1] Although terms such as "folk psychology" and "mindreading" are often considered synonymous, in this case we adopt the Andrews nomenclature (2020) according to which the first term relates to the cognitive ability of an individual to navigate through the social world via a variety of methods, while the second concerns more specifically the ability to attribute mental states (in particular beliefs and desires) to other beings.

[2] Among the culprits of this excessive focus on the false belief task is a philosopher, Daniel Dennett, who devised such an experimental setting to investigate whether or not chimpanzees had a theory of mind (1978).

However, a so-called pluralistic approach to the study of human social cognition has recently come forward (Andrews, Spaulding & Westra, 2020). The sources of inspiration and the demands put forward by pluralists are varied, but a common theme concerns the criticism of the excessive focus on the attribution of beliefs and desires as means, and on prediction and explanation as goals. Pluralists do not believe that we never make use of simulations or inferences based on a rich body of theoretical knowledge, but reject the basic assumption that there is a default method that we use in our social interactions (Fiebich, 2019).

For example, we can build more or less detailed models of others that include not only their desires or beliefs but also their emotions, typical character traits, social roles, etc. (Andrews, 2012; Spaulding, 2018), or we can rely on stereotypes about the social group that person belongs to. All of this goes against the traditionalist assumption that we attribute beliefs and desires almost every time we are engaged in social interaction (Andrews, 2012, presents a much more complete set of non-traditional methods through which we understand others). Which method we use depends from time to time on a myriad of factors, such as how much we consider our "target" to be similar to us or belonging to our in-group (more on this later) and we mindread for a wide variety of purposes: to coordinate our behavior with others or regulate the behavior of others or justify it, as well as of course understanding it (Spaulding, 2018).

Because of this, pluralists criticize the predominance of the false belief task in the study of social cognition. Andrews (2008, 2012) complains that there is little consideration of social psychology, which instead provides very valuable information on how human beings think "in the wild", where several contextual factors have their importance.

Objective

This research project aims to continue and expand the work started by the pluralists and defend it from those who still refer to traditional paradigms. Many criticize the fact that the pluralist research program is still not very organic and fails to answer fundamental questions. This is understandable given the young age of this research program and its pluralist nature, but different conceptual work still needs to be done to provide a coherent systematization in order to increase its predictive and explanatory capabilities. To be more specific, one of the criticisms concerns the absence of explanation regarding why one cognitive mechanism rather than another comes into play in certain contexts (Fiebich, 2019). Fiebich and Coltheart (2015) sketched out an answer referring to the concept of Fluency, defined as "the subjective experience of ease or difficulty associated with completing a

mental task" (Oppenheimer 2008, p. 237). This approach, inspired by the two systems of Kahneman (2011), requires humans to use cheaper and faster cognitive mechanisms whenever the situation allows to fall back on computationally more complex methods when the stakes are high or the social context is particularly opaque. This approach was not developed properly given Anika Fiebich's abandonment of the academic world, but it deserves to be pursued to give a further chance to the pluralist camp. For example, in order to further elaborate on Fiebich's proposal it might be useful to investigate how different intellectual abilities or cultural contexts (Lavelle, 2019a) make one cognitive approach more salient than another.

Another theme that has been only preliminarily addressed by Lavelle (2022, pp. 28-29) is how understanding others sometimes passes through other channels besides sight (as in the case of the false belief task). Lavelle cites studies that reveal how we are able to transmit and grasp a lot of information about our emotional states through touch. Thus the work could continue by examining other sensory channels (such as smell, which has been a recent focus of philosophical interest, e.g. Barwich, 2020).

Methodology

The methodology used should be inspired by the most recent naturalist philosophy, according to which there is no clear separation between science and philosophy, and the latter should always start from the acquisitions of the former. Thus, this research project should make use of both field research (in cognitive ethology, social and developmental psychology, neuroscience, cultural anthropology, and so on) and philosophical analysis.

Expected results

If the research proves successful, it will provide the opportunity to enhance the explanatory capabilities of the pluralist paradigm, defend it from the attacks of traditionalists, and shed light on some of the most heated and lengthy debates within the study of social cognition. For example, a much-debated issue is whether other animals (in particular the great apes) possess a theory of mind (Andrews, 2012). The pluralist school, recognizing different methods by which we understand others, could demonstrate that certain animal species are excellent folk psychologists without attributing propositional attitudes to other individuals. This could also help us find out the phylogenetic origins of our advanced social cognition skills.

A pluralist approach, in addition to restoring depth to the study of social cognition, could shed new light on this and other debates (such as the one on the relationship between autism and the alleged deficit in mindreading skills, e.g. Fiebich, 2016).

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