How an Understanding of Bodily Energy Constrains Theory of Mind

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Abstract

Theory of mind allows us to connect other people's behaviors with a representation of their hidden mental states (beliefs, desires, emotions). Yet, in addition to mental beings, people are also living organisms with physiological states (e.g., feeling tired or energetic). Across three pre-registered experiments (total N = 232), we tested the hypothesis that US adults use a concept of *bodily energy* - a resource of the living body that fuels action - to reason about the minds and behaviors of other agents. Adults systematically judged that certain actions would cause an agent's energy to rise and fall, used an agent's energy state to reason about action cost, and used an agent's beliefs about action cost to infer their energy state. These results are consistent with the proposal that our theory of mind connects other agents' actions with their mental and physiological states. (Full paper is available at: https://osf.io/preprints/psyarxiv/d2axp_v1)

In G. Boleda, I. Dautriche, M. Maldonado, C. Saldana and T. Torrent (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 48th Annual Conference of the Cognitive Science Society*