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An Exploration of High and Low Level Processes in Understanding Others' Minds

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An Exploration of High and Low Level Processes in Understanding Others' Minds

Psychology, Social Science

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Imagine watching a scene play out between your two friends, Sally and Ann. Sally looks back and forth between Ann and someone else; then makes an angry face and walks away. In an instant, you are able to glean a sense of Sally's emotional state. You generate a theory about her belief and her plan for action: She looks mad and is going to make a scene!

The ability to generate these rich theories about others' minds stands with language and a few other cognitive capacities as a unique achievement of the human brain. As this topic of research has burgeoned over the past forty years, the central questions driving the field have evolved. There is a new push beyond the classical theory-of-mind tasks which emphasize a single critical litmus test: the capacity to think about what another person is thinking. New research is starting to show that there are actually multiple levels of processing for this ability, high level (explicit) processes which are cognitively flexible but resource intensive and low level (implicit) processes which are rigid but cognitively efficient.

In the current study, we developed a battery of seven tests that measure these different processes as well as ability in emotion processing, working memory and non-verbal communication. We are currently recruiting UNC undergraduates participating in the Psychology Study Pool and expect a sample size around fifty with an average age between nineteen and twenty-one. We expect one explicit task will be similar to the other explicit task. Similarly, we anticipate a higher performance correlation within the implicit tasks. However, it remains unclear if there is any predictive value from performance in one category in relation to the other. Further exploration into these correlations would still be relatively novel in the field.