

Abstract

Past research has found a positive correlation between long-term fiction reading and mentalizing ability. Some suggest that it is fiction reading that enhances theory of mind (ToM). However, this conclusion cannot be drawn directly as correlation does not imply causality. To address this question about causality, Kidd and Castano (2013) adopted an experimental design to test their hypothesis that a single session of exposure to a specific type of fiction – literary fiction – would enhance ToM. Results show that only literary fiction, but not other types of fiction, primes improved ToM performance. Nevertheless, several studies have reported failure in replicating the priming effect. This paper aims to discuss factors that may have led to the mixed results reported by the past studies. It is proposed that it may be motivation to mentalize, instead of mentalizing ability, that is primed by fiction reading. Results show that enhanced motivation to mentalize, but not ToM performance, can be primed only if readers focus on the mental states of characters while reading, regardless of the fiction type. ToM performance is predicted by habits of reading print materials.

Keywords: fiction, mentalizing, theory of mind, motivation to mentalize