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The role of social cognition in collaborative learning in healthy older adults

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Introduction
Learning and memory abilities decline in healthy ageing. Learning collaboratively with a familiar partner may improve older adults’ learning performance. We examined older adults’ learning with familiar and unfamiliar partners, and with perceived Human and Computer partners. The study aim was to determine whether better social abilities underline more efficient learning with different learning partners.

Method
Study 1
Participants: 24 older (mean = 68.68 years, SD = 7.19) adults.
Participants completed the task in pairs, once with a familiar partner and once with a stranger.
Each pair had a Director and Matcher. The Director’s set of tangrams were arranged in a specific order, which was communicated to the Matcher. Pairs work together to create and learn referential labels, and interaction becomes more efficient.

Study 2
Participants completed a similar task with a Wizard of Oz computer program assuming the role of Director.
“Human” condition: participants told communicating with a Research Assistant in the next room, and the program used natural speech recordings. Deception was successful.
“Computer” condition: participants heard the same instructions in a synthetic speech voice.

Social cognition was assessed using Reading the Mind in the Eyes5, Emman Faces5, Visual Perspective Taking6 (Study 1), Judgment of Preferenices6 (Study 1) and Theory of Mind Stories7 (Study 2).

Results
Speed of learning was measured using time to complete the task and the number of interactive turns taken.

Study 1
Unfamiliar and familiar partners learned at a similar rate.

Participants were initially quicker when interacting with the “Computer”, but by final trials, they were significantly quicker when they believed they were interacting with a human.

As the biggest difference in participant performance was in early trials, this data was used to explore the relationship between social cognition, interaction and learning performance.

Study 1
Visual Perspective Taking predicted how quickly participants completed the task with Unfamiliar (F(1,22) = 15.03, p = 0.0008, R² = 0.38), but not familiar partners (F(1,22) = 3.05, p = 0.10, R² = 0.08).

Study 2
Reading the Mind in the Eyes predicted how many turns participants took during with perceived Human (F(1,22) = 8.89, p = 0.006, R² = 0.26), but not Computer partners (F(1,22) = 0.92, p = 0.64, R² = 0.03).

Delayed Recall
After 1 hour, participants recalled the labels for shapes described to them by a “human” partner more accurately than those described to them by a “computer” partner (χ²(1, N = 24) = 6.56, p < 0.05).

Social cognition did not predict delayed recall accuracy in either the human or computer condition.

Conclusions
Familiarity does not differentially affect learning – older adults learn with comparable efficiency with familiar partners and strangers.
Learning with a computer system is more efficient and effective if participants are told that the computer system is a human being.
Social cognition predicts efficiency of interaction in early trials with unfamiliar partners, and perceived human partners.
Social cognition predicts interaction with perceived human partners, but does not predict recall accuracy.

References

Further information
We are now conducting the same studies using a route learning task based on the Map Task paradigm to explore whether these effects are task specific or generalise to other learning and memory paradigms.
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