

4

Being Pluralist About Understanding Others

Contexts and Communicative Practices

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1. Introduction

Social understanding does not take place in a vacuum. It is embedded in a set of complex contexts—including pragmatic, social, cultural/normative contexts—that define the given situation in which a particular instance of social understanding takes place. When, for example, I see you grasp a cup, I would not be able to understand your underlying intention without recognizing, at some level, the pragmatic context in which your action takes place—you may be grasping the cup to take a drink during a tea party; alternatively, you may be cleaning up after the party. Moreover, on some occasions, the relevance of the pragmatic context may be determined by my person-specific knowledge of the agent, my history of relations with him or her, or by who he or she is. For example, I would be surprised to find my son playing with toy cars since he never did before; but I wouldn't be surprised to find my daughter playing with them since she has a history of playing with toy cars. Furthermore, context is neither static in its meaning, nor is its influential role in social understanding unidirectional. Indeed, our knowledge about another person's preferences and dispositions to act in specific situations may change over time; I've been able to predict with certainty for years that you would order the steak in a restaurant, but now, since you have become a vegetarian, I don't expect you to order the steak anymore. These simple examples suggest how context and one's knowledge of it may impact social understanding. But the embodied dynamics of social interaction may also shape the meaning of the context in which it takes place. This becomes most apparent when we take a look at communicative practices.

In this chapter, we elucidate the role of context in different varieties of social understanding. In this regard, we defend a pluralist approach and consider the role of mindreading understood as a form of theoretical inference or simulation, as well as the importance of embodied interaction. We think that all of these practices need to be considered in order to comprehend the rich effects of