

Adaptiveness of Social Relational Models

Student researcher: Lisa Wallace

Supervisor: Dr Helen Davis

Ethics Permit number: 2013/193

When people engage in social interactions, it is believed that they adopt one of four possible mental models of the social relationship (e.g., mutual sharing relationships, authority relationships etc.) that serve to define the “rules” for proper conduct of the people involved and appropriate ways of making decisions in those relationships. Some types of relationship have very simple rules, while others have more complex rules. In this study, we aimed to test whether people already engaged in a complex memory task would show increased preference for relatively simple social relational models.

Ninety adults (18-63 years of age, 80% female) completed some memory tasks. They were then randomly allocated to one of three groups: One group completed a complex memory task at the same time that they were asked to make judgements about which model to apply to a set of social scenarios, the second group listened to distracting Latvian poetry while making judgements about which social model to apply, and the third group simply made judgements about which social model to apply without any additional treatment.

We found that, generally, some social models were selected more often than others (e.g. people did not select the authority model for very many scenarios). People’s preferences for different social models also depended strongly on the type relationship in the scenario (e.g. the authority model was more often selected for parent/child relationships than for friend or colleague relationships). However, neither background distraction nor the concurrent complex memory task resulted in any significant difference in the pattern of preferences people showed for the different models.

At this stage, it does not appear that people apply simpler social models than normal when they are under cognitively demanding conditions. However, to draw definite conclusions, a larger sample of participants would be needed.