

Social Understanding Depends on Interpersonal Attunement Across Neurotypes

Philosophy of mind has often treated social understanding as something that happens inside an individual mind: one person correctly interpreting another's thoughts or emotions. In psychology, this assumption shows up in the way we measure "accuracy" in tasks like emotion recognition, where responses are compared to a presumed correct answer. But increasing attention to mental diversity, especially in autism research, raises a basic question: does this individual-focused framework really capture how understanding works in everyday life? It may be that everyday social interaction relies on forms of coordination and alignment that are not easily reduced to individual decoding abilities.

The double empathy problem (Milton, 2012) suggests that communication difficulties between autistic and non-autistic people are not simply the result of a deficit in one group. Instead, they may arise from a mismatch between differently structured minds. Misunderstanding, on this view, is not one-sided but reciprocal. If this is right, then successful social understanding may depend not only on individual cognitive skill, but also on shared expectations, perceptual styles, and communicative norms. What counts as smooth interaction may therefore vary depending on how well these expectations align between people.

Vocal communication makes this especially visible. Much of what we take to be emotional meaning in a voice comes through tone and rhythm rather than words alone. These qualities often feel obvious and objective. Yet research suggests that autistic and non-autistic individuals can differ in how they produce and interpret such cues. If people sometimes experience greater ease, resonance, or comfort when interacting with others of a similar neurotype, then what counts as "expressive" or "clear" may not be universal. Instead, it may depend on interpersonal attunement. In this sense, vocal communication offers a concrete way to observe how alignment between communicative styles can shape whether understanding feels immediate or strained.

Seen this way, patterns of miscommunication are not simply failures of competence. They may reflect differences in alignment between minds. This challenges the idea that there is a single neutral standard of communicative ability against which everyone can be measured. It also raises methodological concerns about how psychological research defines "accuracy" and "typicality" when group-level norms are treated as the benchmark for successful performance. Looking closely at everyday mental diversity does more than adjust current theories. It pushes us to question whether social understanding is something individuals possess or something that develops through interaction between different kinds of minds. Taking this possibility seriously may require a more relational model of social cognition, one that places interpersonal attunement at the centre rather than at the margins of theory.