An Action-Oriented Approach
to Understanding Social Cognition

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The understanding of human social cognition is an important issue in cognitive science, social sciences and philosophy. Roughly speaking, there are two scientific approaches for studying social cognition today. One is cognitive science, especially cognitive neuroscience. The neural substrates of social cognition are explored in cognitive neuroscience, which is necessary and important for the understanding of the physical implementation of social cognitive skills. However, this approach cannot explain the content or meaning of the knowledge acquired in social cognition. The other is social psychology and social sciences (such as computational social science, a new inter-discipline), in which human being is regarded as an agent that knows and acts in the social environment, and where the formation of meaning can be studied.

In this paper, the second of these two approaches is selected. Based on the conceptions of the pragmatistsøsymbolic interactionism and analysis of the nature of knowledge, as well as on the investigation of action to be found in computational social sciences, it is argued that social cognition is an action-oriented process with the following characteristics:

(1) its goal is to obtain a knowledge that predicts or guides social action about self and others, and not to provide true descriptions (for example, in computational social science, the function of knowledge extracted out of Big Data is mainly to predict the behavior of an individual or a group);

(2) the meaning of this knowledge is derived from social interactions and modified through interpretation (in particular, knowledge-how, as the product of

social cognition, makes up the habits of social action);

(3) this knowledge spreads by means of õcopying successful behaviorö (a key idea of the õSocial Physicsö defended by A. Pentland that explains why copying successful behavior is the main channel of spreading of knowledge-how);

(4) if computation is regarded as the dynamic change or transformation of information (and not as the syntactic manipulation of symbols), a cycle of action-perception in social cognition can be explained from a computational perspective, which implies that computationalism and pragmatism may be compatible in the understanding of cognition.