

Now you see it, now you don't: Adult-age differences in empathic accuracy

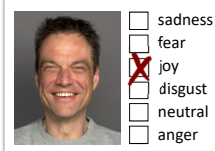
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Background



- sadness
- fear
- joy
- disgust
- neutral
- anger

Younger adults are more accurate than older adults in **recognizing emotions** from facial expressions, voices, or bodily postures (e.g., *Ruffman et al., 2008*).

This has led to the notion that the ability to infer internal states in others (**empathic accuracy**) may decline with age.

However, **traditional research paradigms** in age-comparative research have been criticized because they are **too artificial**.

We developed **new research paradigms** with enhanced ecological validity for investigating age differences in empathic accuracy.

Method

Empathic accuracy in the lab: Strangers

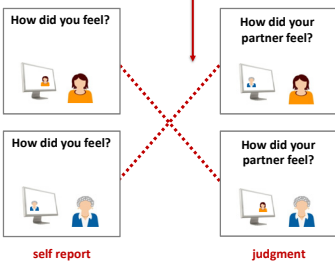


Paradigm: Semi-structured, videotaped conversation

Sample: $N = 208$ unfamiliar women

- 102 younger (20–31 years) / 106 older women
- Interacting dyads stratified by age composition

accuracy = agreement
(Fisher's Z transformed correlation)



- Partners independently reviewed the videotaped conversation
- 8 self- and other-ratings, 9 items

Empathic accuracy in daily life: Couples

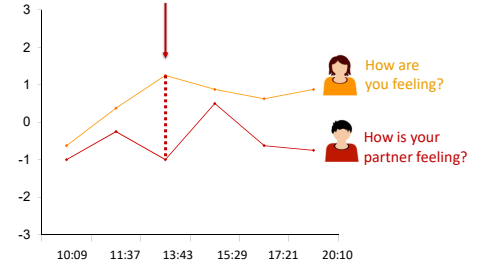


Paradigm: Dyadic experience sampling with mobile phones

Sample: $N = 100$ heterosexual couples

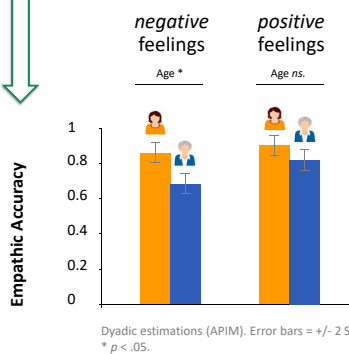
- 50 younger couples (20–30 years)
- 50 older couples (70–80 years)

accuracy = agreement
(prediction in multilevel models)



- Partners independently rated their own and their partner's affect
- 8 items, $M = 86$ measurements

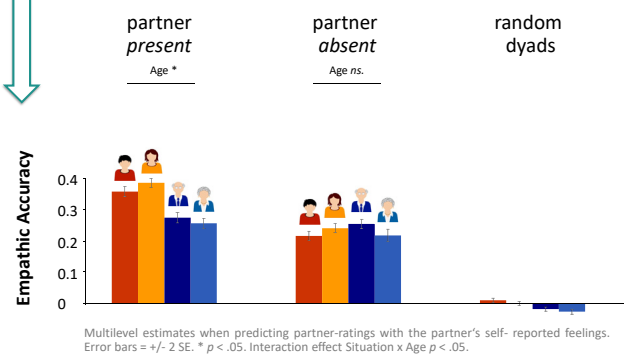
Results



Convergent results emerged for content-coded reports of one's own and the other partner's positive and negative **thoughts**.

- Older adults were less accurate in inferring their partner's negative feelings.
- However, no age differences emerged for positive feelings.
- ▶ This supports the notion that **motivational factors** contribute to age differences in empathic accuracy (*Richter, Diezel, & Kunzmann, 2011*)

Blanke, Rauers, & Riediger, 2015 (*Psychology and Aging*)



- Older adults were less accurate in inferring the partner's feelings while the partner was momentarily present and could be observed.
- However, no age differences emerged during the partner's absence, and accuracy was still greater than chance.
- ▶ This suggests that **empathic inferences from knowledge about the other partner** may be robust to aging.

Rauers, Blanke, & Riediger, 2013 (*Psychological Science*)

Conclusions and Outlook

- We developed and tested new research paradigms with enhanced ecological validity to **challenge the notion that empathic accuracy decreases with age**.
- **Differential age effects** emerged in both paradigms, suggesting that **some facets of empathic accuracy may be more robust to aging** than others.
- Our current research investigates the **reasons for age differences if they occur**.

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