

Age Related Gains in Empathy: Subjective and Behavioral Evidence

Introduction

Older adults have been expected to experience and express higher levels of empathy because generativity (e.g. McAdams, de St. Aubin & Logan, 1993) and a pro social orientation (e.g. Aymanns, Filipp & Winkler, 2003) are considered highly salient tasks in old age. However, self report studies have suggested either age related stability (Grühn et al., 2008) or declines (Schieman & van Gundy, 2000) in dispositional empathy. It seems plausible that different facets of empathy (cognitive, emotional, and behavioral) show different age trajectories. Moreover, motivational processes (both on a general and on a situational level) should have an impact on empathic experiences and behavior (Kunzmann & Grühn, 2005). This experimental study investigated empathy in vivo. Distinct dimensions of empathy were measured under controlled laboratory conditions.

Central Hypotheses

Motivation should influence all dimensions of empathy.

Situation relevant to older adults	Situation relevant to younger adults
Level of functioning Younger < Older	Level of functioning Younger > Older

Method

Participants

80 Young Adults ($M = 32.1$; $SD = 7.1$; 50% ♀)
73 Older Adults ($M = 58.6$; $SD = 7.1$; 52% ♀)

Stimuli

Film clips depicting eight real persons, who speak of a personally relevant life topic and show authentic emotions.
Four persons speak about the topic "Loss of Family", which is especially relevant to old people; four persons speak about the topic "Life Transition", which is especially relevant to young people.

Procedure

Participants watched eight film clips (duration of each clip was 75 seconds). Facial expressions were recorded on video. After each film clip participants rated ...
... the emotions of the target person depicted in the film clip.
(20 item adjective list e.g.: sad, amused, interested)
... their own emotions during the film clip.
(20 item adjective list e.g.: sad, amused, sympathetic)

Dependent Variables

Emotional Reactivity (self report): Extent to which participants reported the target emotion. (Items: sad for topic "Loss of Family", amused for topic "Life Transition")

Emotional Reactivity (behavior): Extent to which participants expressed the target emotion. (Ratings of facial expressions of negative affect for topic "Loss of Family"; Ratings of facial expressions of positive affect for topic "Life Transition")

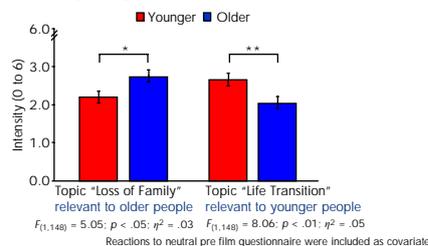
Empathic Concern (self report): Extent to which participants reported sympathetic feelings. (Items: sympathetic, unconcerned [], touched)

Empathic Concern (behavior): Extent to which participants expressed empathic behavior. (Ratings of facial expressions of empathy while listening to both topics)

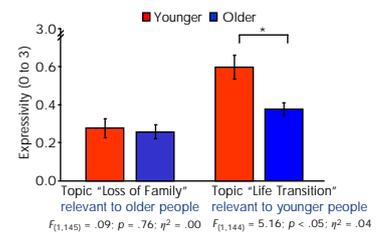
Empathic Accuracy: Intraclass Correlation between participants' ratings of target persons' emotions and the target persons' self reports. (20 items, e.g.: sad, amused, interested)

Results

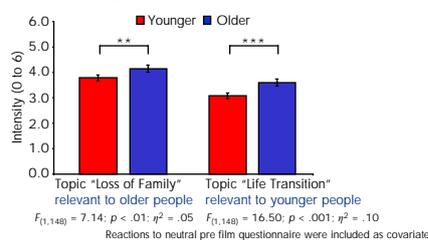
Older adults reported greater **emotional reactivity** than younger adults if the situation was relevant to older adults. (for younger adults opposite results)



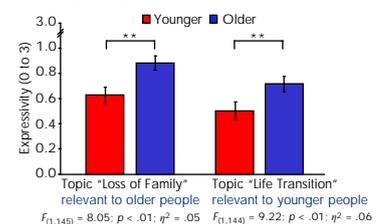
No age differences in **expressed emotional reactivity** if the situation was relevant to older adults.



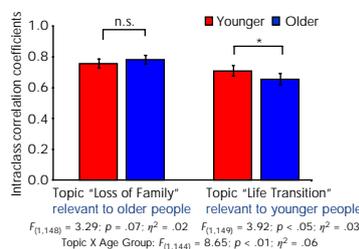
Older adults reported greater **empathic concern** than younger adults in both situations.



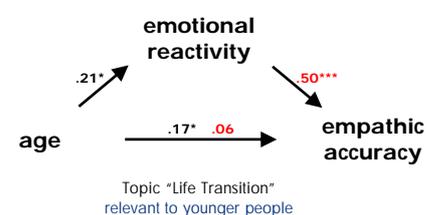
Older adults expressed greater **empathic concern** than younger adults in both situations.



No age differences in **empathic accuracy** if the situation was relevant to older adults.



Age differences in **emotional reactivity** explained age differences in **empathic accuracy**.



Conclusions

Empathic concern and emotional reactivity were clearly separated in the present study. Seemingly older adults are aware of the importance of concern and emotional support and they offer it, even in situations of lower personal relevance. In addition older adults did not express emotions according to their self reported arousal level. This could indicate better emotion regulation capabilities of older adults or different display rules for positive and negative emotions (in this case sadness). Finally findings indicate that the influence of age on empathic accuracy is mediated by age differences in emotional reactivity. One's own emotions in a certain interpersonal interaction seem to provide important cues for the rating of other persons' emotions. Probably it is not decline of cognitive functioning that leads to older adults' lower empathic accuracy – it is less emotional reactivity due to lower relevance of topic.