If I Take Your Perspective, Will I Understand You Better?

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In Collaboration with Maryhope Howland, Empathic Accuracy/Invisible Support Study

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ABSTRACT

Perspective-taking (PT) is the capacity to conceptualize and understand another's point of view. *Empathic accuracy* (EA) is the proficiency with which one infers another's thoughts and feelings. One's capacity for PT is usually evaluated as a *disposition*, or trait, measured by subjective self-report scales. One's capacity for EA, however, is typically assessed as an objective *behavior*. The difference in the way these two capacities are defined and evaluated may explain why studies rarely show a correlation between them. This study attempted to reconcile this discrepancy by defining PT as EA is defined: as a behavior—specifically, as one's tendency to spontaneously use first-person pronouns (1PP) when inferring a close partner's thoughts and feelings during an EA task.

RESULTS

This study found that **36 out of 85** perceivers **(42%)** used 1PP-PT at least once during the empathic accuracy task (Methods, step 5).

This study also found **no correlation between the use of 1PP-PT and empathic accuracy**; i.e., the 42% who perspective-took with 1PP pronouns during the empathic accuracy task were not better at inferring their respective partners' thoughts and feelings than those who used third-person pronouns.

This study also found **no correlation between the use of 1PP-PT and perceiver trait-empathy**; i.e., measuring high in dispositional empathy did not predict the use of 1PP perspective-taking during this study's empathic accuracy task.
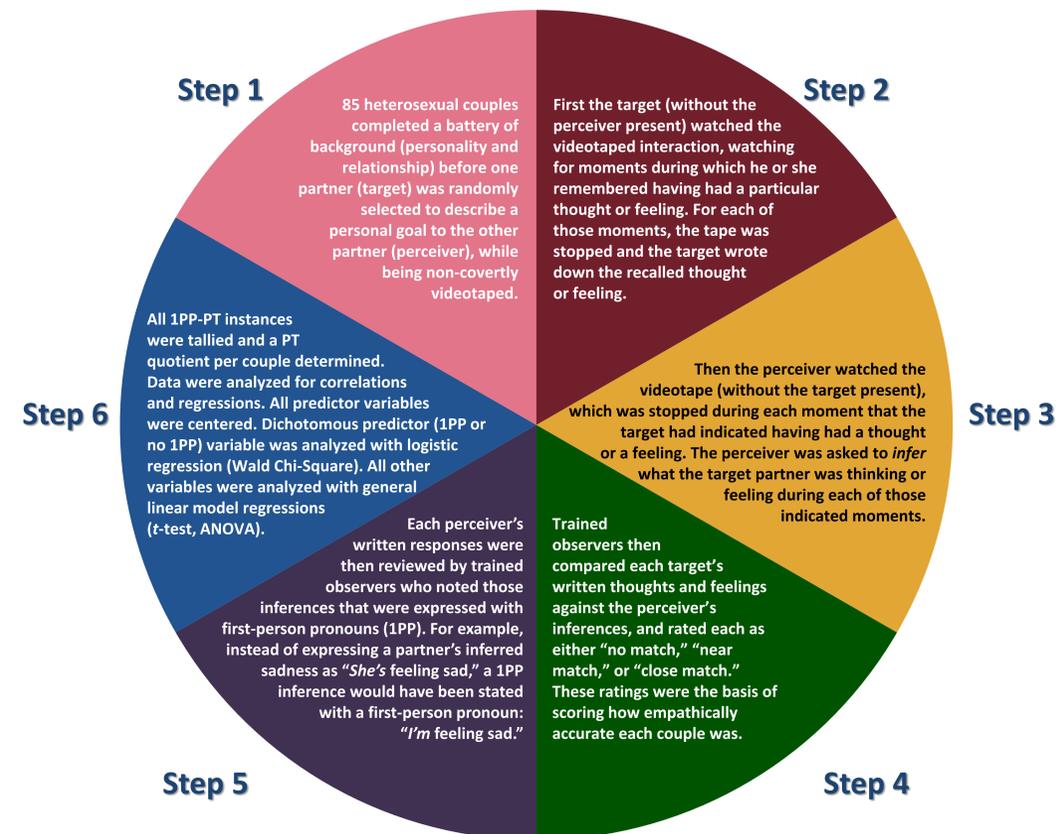
WHAT THIS STUDY FOUND INSTEAD:

• A **positive correlation** between **avoidant attachment** orientation and the number of 1PP-PT versus non 1PP-PT inferences made, $t(36) = +0.332$, $p = 0.0478$.

• A **negative correlation** between 1PP-PT and the **perceiver's trust in the target**, $t(84) = -0.228$, $p = 0.0355$.

• A **negative correlation** between 1PP-PT and the **perceiver's overall perceived relationship quality**, $t(84) = -0.366$, $p = 0.0006$.

• A **negative correlations** between 1PP-PT and **perceiver's perceived relationship quality components (PRQC)** (Fletcher et al., 2000), with the except of passion, for which there was no correlation to 1PP-PT, $p<.05$:

  --Satisfaction, $\chi^2(1) = +9.25$, $p = 0.0024$
  --Commitment, $\chi^2(1) = +9.77$, $p = 0.0018$
  --Intimacy, $\chi^2(1) = +4.99$, $p = 0.0255$
  --Trust, $\chi^2(1) = +4.20$, $p = 0.0403$
  --Love, $\chi^2(1) = +7.07$, $p = 0.0078$

• **1PP-PT predicted** perceiver's **negative tone**:

  --Judgmental tone, $t(1) = +2.86$, $p = 0.0053$
  --Condescending tone, $t(1) = +2.76$, $p = 0.0072$

METHOD

Step 1
85 heterosexual couples completed a battery of background (personality and relationship) before one partner (target) was randomly selected to describe a personal goal to the other partner (perceiver), while being non-covertly videotaped.

Step 2
First the target (without the perceiver present) watched the videotaped interaction, watching for moments during which he or she remembered having had a particular thought or feeling. For each of those moments, the tape was stopped and the target wrote down the recalled thought or feeling.

Step 3
Then the perceiver watched the videotape (without the target present), which was stopped during each moment that the target had indicated having had a thought or a feeling. The perceiver was asked to *infer* what the target partner was thinking or feeling during each of those indicated moments.

Step 4
Trained observers then compared each target's written thoughts and feelings against the perceiver's inferences, and rated each as either "no match," "near match," or "close match." These ratings were the basis of scoring how empathically accurate each couple was.

Step 5
Each perceiver's written responses were then reviewed by trained observers who noted those inferences that were expressed with first-person pronouns (1PP). For example, instead of expressing a partner's inferred sadness as "*She's* feeling sad," a 1PP inference would have been stated with a first-person pronoun: "*I'm* feeling sad."

Step 6
All 1PP-PT instances were tallied and a PT quotient per couple determined. Data were analyzed for correlations and regressions. All predictor variables were centered. Dichotomous predictor (1PP or no 1PP) variable was analyzed with logistic regression (Wald Chi-Square). All other variables were analyzed with general linear model regressions (*t*-test, ANOVA).

DISCUSSION

No correlations between the use of 1PP-PT and EA was found. Nor was the use of 1PP-PT found to be related to the perceiver's ethnicity, personality, trait-empathy, or other dispositional measures.

Because the nature of the EAIS task *obligated* perceivers to infer their target-partner's thoughts and feelings regarding a controlled topic and in an unnatural setting, such factors may have prompted the use of 1PP-PT for reasons other than the pursuit of empathic accuracy. According to the literature, possible theories include:

--**Novelty**: 1PP-PT was negatively correlated with the frequency with which the target had presented the goal topic prior to the experiment ($t = -0.437$, $p = .0077$). The use of 1PP-PT may therefore be employed when knowledge and familiarity of a topic is low, but inferencing is expected or required (Ickes, 2003).

--**Relationship dissatisfaction**: Negative correlations between 1PP-PT and dimensions of relationship quality suggest that 1PP-PT users tend to rate their relationships as less satisfying, less committed, less intimate, less loving, less trusting, and less close than did their partners and non-1PP-PT users. Such perceptions may inhibit effortful and therefore successful inferencing (Ickes, 2003).

--**Unresponsiveness**: Correlations showed that 1PP-PT users tended to be rated by their target-partners as unresponsive. Given that 1PP-PT users are not empathically accurate, their use of 1PP-PT may be their way of "going through the inferencing motions" without fully committing to or achieving empathic accuracy (Reis, 2007).

FUTURE PERSPECTIVE-TAKING STUDIES

Because this study used an existing data set collected for an already completed study, some background and post-task measures essential to the testing of explanatory theories were not available. As such, the following hypotheses should be tested in future 1PP-PT research:

--**Threat**: Research has shown that EA can be impaired during situational or relationship threat. Perceivers wishing to avoid distress and relationship disharmony may self-impair their EA abilities if they feel that knowing the target-partner's thoughts and feelings could destabilize the relationship (Ickes, 2003). Because 1PP-PT users were not found to be empathically *inaccurate* (there was no correlation), the degree to which the perceiver found the target's personal goal to be threatening should be measured for control and analytic purposes.

--**Defensiveness:** Targets whose words or actions suggest that the perceiver is in some way too incompetent to discuss the target's personal goal may cause the perceiver to become defensive and therefore inference-impaired (Tjosvold et al., 1980). Because 1PP-PT users were empathically inaccurate, self-reports of perceiver defensiveness and other relevant post-task states should be measured and the findings incorporated.

CONCLUSION

Although this study found that behavioral PT was not predictive of EA, the use of first-person inference statements was strongly associated with relationship valuations that were negative (e.g. relationship dissatisfaction, partner mistrust, and unresponsiveness to partner). This suggests that motives other than EA drive perspective-taking as defined in this study.

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