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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BACKGROUND

- The Davis (1983) multidimensional empathy model features two empathy components: *affective* (emotional concern, sympathy, caring, compassion) and *cognitive* (inferring the mental states of others).
- The cognitive-empathy (CE) capacity to conceptualize and understand another's point of view—to be "in another's shoes"—is called **perspective-taking** (PT).
- The proficiency with which one infers another's thoughts and feelings is known as **empathic accuracy** (Ickes, 2003).
- One's capacity for CE/PT should therefore predict EA; however, studies have shown this not to be the case. EA and PT researchers have yet to define the controversial relation between EA and CE/PT.

PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY

Whereas previous studies have defined PT as a *capacity* based on measures of dispositional CE self-report scales—and failed to reveal a PT-EA link—this study instead defined PT as a *tendency* to make spontaneous, literal **first-person (1PP)** inferences, and measured this tendency based on one's *actual use* of such inferences during an EA task.

METHOD

EMPATHIC ACCURACY/INVISIBLE SUPPORT (EAIS) STUDY

- 85 heterosexual couples completed a battery of background (personality and relationship).
- In a videotaped interaction, one partner (target) described a personal goal to the other (perceiver).
- First, the target, without the perceiver present, watched the videotape for moments during which a particular thought or feeling had occurred; for each of those moments, the tape was stopped and the thought or feeling was written down.
- Then the perceiver watched the videotape without the target present; the tape was stopped during each moment that the target had indicated having had a thought or a feeling. The perceiver then wrote down the target's inferred thought or feeling for each designated moment.
- Trained observers compared the targets' *written* thoughts and feelings to the perceivers' written inferences, and rated each as "no match," "near match," or "close match." These ratings were the basis of the couple's empathic accuracy score or "quotient."
- Trained observers then watched the *video* for the degree to which the perceiver provided (or did not provide) invisible support (IS)—non-obvious, "under the radar" assistance of an emotional, practical, tangible, affectionate, or reassuring nature.

PERSPECTIVE-TAKING (PT) STUDY

- The perceivers' inferences from the EAIS study were reviewed by trained observers for inferences that were expressed in 1PP-PT.

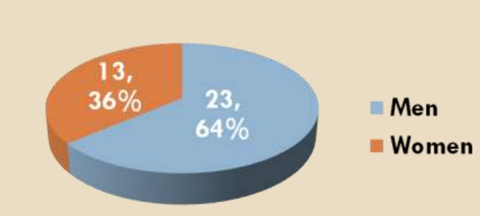
> **EXAMPLE: If the target's written thought was, "I wish I could go to the movies tonight," the inference, "She wishes she could go to the movies tonight," although accurate, is not a *1PP-PT* instance. An accurate 1PP-PT perceiver inference would be, "I wish I could go to the movies tonight."**

- 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).

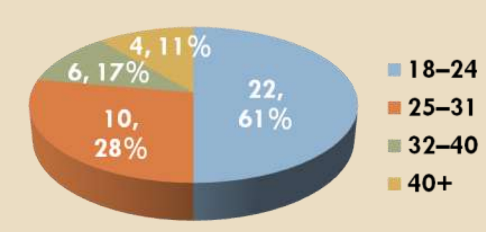
RESULTS

THE DEMOGRAPHICS OF 1PP PERSPECTIVE-TAKING

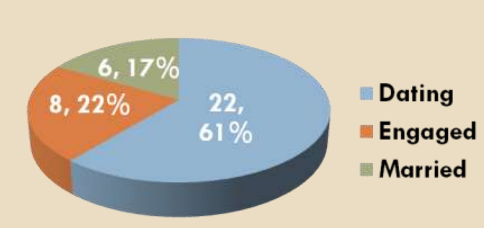
- This study found that 36 out of 85 perceivers (42%) used 1PP-PT at least once when inferring the thoughts and feelings of their partners (targets). Although demographic data did not significantly predict the use of PT, some trends appeared:



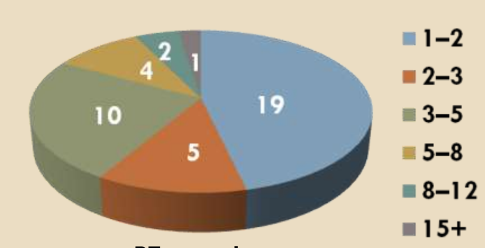
PT users by SEX



PT users by AGE (years)



PT users by RELATIONSHIP STATUS



PT users by RELATIONSHIP DURATION (years)

USE OF 1PP-PT AND EMPATHIC ACCURACY

- **No correlation** between 1PP-PT and EA.

USE OF 1PP-PT AND ATTACHMENT ORIENTATION

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

USE OF 1PP-PT AND TRUST

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

USE OF 1PP-PT AND PERCEIVED RELATIONSHIP QUALITY

- **Negative correlation** between 1PP-PT and the perceiver's overall perceived relationship quality, $t(84) = -0.366$, $p = 0.0006$.
- **Negative correlations** between 1PP-PT and perceiver's PRQC (Fletcher et al., 2000) dimensions (except for passion), $p<.05$.
- **1PP-PT predicted** perceiver PRQC measures:
  --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, $\chi^2(1) = +7.07$, $p = 0.0078$

USE OF 1PP-PT AND SUPPORT PROVISION

- **Negative correlations** between 1PP-PT and support dimensions of:
  --Sharing of similar experiences, $t(84) = -0.387$, $p = 0.0003$
  --Invisible emotional support, $t(84) = -0.306$, $p = 0.0046$
  --Invisible practical support, $t(84) = -0.310$, $p = 0.0041$
  --Invisible feedback, $t(84) = -0.236$, $p = 0.0310$
  --Invisible reassurance, $t(84) = -0.345$, $p = 0.0013$
  --Target feeling listened to, $t(84) = -0.287$, $p = 0.0078$
  --Responder's perception of target's responsiveness, $t(84) = -0.366$, $p = 0.0006$
- **1PP-PT predicted** perceiver's negative tone during support provision:
  --Judgmental tone, $t(1) = +2.86$, $p = 0.0053$
  --Condescending tone, $t(1) = +2.76$, $p = 0.0072$

WHAT 1PP-PT WAS *NOT* ASSOCIATED WITH:

- No significant correlations between 1PP-PT and perceiver's personality (Big Five), trait-level empathy, self-esteem, expressivity, perceived social support, ambivalent attachment orientation, ethnicity, gender, age, relationship length, or relationship duration.

INTERACTIONS

No significant interactions were found.

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 of 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).

FOR FUTURE PT 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 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*, 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

- No correlation was found between EA and the use of 1PP-PT when inferring the thoughts and feelings of a close other.
- No correlation was found between the capacity for dispositional empathy and the use of PT.
- Consistent with the literature, the relation between EA and the literal use of 1PP-PT EA is as controversial as the relation between EA and dispositional PT.
- Analyses strongly suggest that the use of 1PP-PT is driven by motives other than EA. Future PT studies should address these possible motives.

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