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Reading Minds: Measuring Empathic Accuracy with Daily Diary Questionnaires and Dyadic Interactions

Empathic accuracy (EA) is a perceiver's ability to accurately infer the thoughts and feelings of another (Ickes et al., 1995). Accuracy has been examined with regards to various mood and emotion measures (Kenny & Acitelli, 2001; Pietromonaco, Rook & Lewis, 1992), as well as thought contents (Ickes, Stinson & Bissonette, & Garcia, 1990). Originally, EA and other versions of perceptual accuracy were studied cross-sectionally with one-time questionnaires (Kenny & Acitelli, 2001), or with brief lab interactions with a friend or a stranger (Pietromonaco, Rook & Lewis, 1992). Ickes and his colleagues created the Unstructured Dyadic Interaction Paradigm, the standard for studying EA, in which they ask dyad members to infer one another's thoughts and feelings from a videotape of a spontaneous interaction. This paradigm is micro-level in scope but allows for on-line analysis of a specific situation in which empathic accuracy can be measured. A more recent approach that addresses the micro-level limitations of dyadic interactions is the collection of longitudinal daily diary data (Wilhelm & Perrez, 2004), which allows for macro-level, dynamic investigations of EA. Previous data from diary studies (Howland, et al. 2005) allowed for operationalization of EA in various ways, and facilitated studying it over time. Several alternative indices of EA include, bias, discrepancy, correlation, presence, and pattern. Overall, this data suggested that EA is most strongly associated with relationship satisfaction when evaluating negative emotions, specifically those of the perceiving partner.

The current study utilizes both the more traditional dyadic interaction method, as well as the more recent diary method, to study EA. Our sample includes couples from New York City who have been living together for at least 6 months; participants complete a 3-week long diary at home, as well as take part in a 12-minute dyadic interaction in a lab setting. Diary questions include various mood scales for self and partner, questions on support processes occurring within the relationship, and questions about sexual activity and motivation. The dyadic interaction utilizes a support paradigm and entails each partner talking for 6 minutes about something he/she would like to change about him/herself, with the partner responding as he/she normally would in any ordinary setting.

As this is an ongoing study, final data have yet to be analyzed. However, we hope to compare the two methods to understand the intricacies of using such measures when studying EA, as well as learn what types of similarities and differences exist in EA, if any, in micro- and macro-level situations. In addition, associations between EA levels and other relationship measures, such as relationship satisfaction, support processes, and sexual activity and motivation, will also be examined.