

Theory of Mind and Perspective Taking in Older Age: A Motivational Perspective

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Abstract

There was a folk notion of increased perspective taking abilities with age, such that older adults should be better at understanding others' behavior and intention, and show greater empathy to others. However, empirical studies on older adults showed the reverse pattern. In a series of experiments, I investigated the phenomenon from a motivational perspective. In Experiment 1, I manipulated perceived closeness between participants and the experimenter in a *faux pas* recognition task, and in Experiment 2, I manipulated perceived closeness as well as distance between participants and the target in an emotion recognition task, to examine whether the experimental manipulations could influence participants' performance in the two perspective taking tasks. The results revealed that in the control condition without any experimental manipulation, the well-documented negative age effect was only replicated in both *faux pas* recognition and emotion recognition. However, in the closeness manipulation condition, older adults significantly enhanced their performance in both tasks, such that they now performed at a comparable level with younger adults; whereas younger adults did not show such enhancement effects. Moreover, in Experiment 2, with a distance manipulation, both younger and older adults showed impaired performance in emotion recognition. Findings from these two experiments supported the *Motivational Trigger Hypothesis*, such that the well-documented poor performance in perspective taking tasks of older adults might be due to a lack of motivation instead of a lack of ability to perform in laboratory settings. In daily contexts, especially with someone close to them, older adults might be more motivated to take others' perspective and thus perform better on the perspective-taking tasks.

Key words: perspective taking, age differences, motivational trigger hypothesis,
experimental manipulation

摘要

觀點採擇能力是指理解對方的行為，意圖以及表現出對他人的同情。大部分人都會認為隨著年齡的增加，老年人應當能夠更好地採擇別人的觀點。然而，實證研究表明，老年人反而表現的更差。通過一系列的實驗，我從動機的角度來研究這一現象。在實驗 1 中，我操縱了實驗參與者對主試的親密感，並讓他們完成一項失禮識別任務，在實驗 2 中，我們操縱了實驗參與者對情緒識別目標人物的親密感以及疏遠感，並讓他們其後完成一項情緒識別任務，以檢驗實驗操作是否會影響參與者在兩個觀點採擇任務的表現。結果表明，在沒有任何實驗操縱的控制條件下，年齡對於觀點採擇任務表現的負面影響被複製了。然而，在親密感的實驗操縱條件下，老年人在兩個任務的表現獲得了顯著的提升，甚至達到了年輕人的相當水平，同時，年輕人並沒有表現出親密感的促進作用。此外，在實驗 2，通過疏遠感的操縱，年輕人和老年人都表現出較差的觀點採擇能力。本研究結果支持了動機觸發假設，顯示之前實驗室研究中老年人較差的觀點採擇任務表現可能是由於缺乏動力去完成任務，而非缺乏觀點採擇能力所致，而在日常生活方面，尤其是與他們比較親近的人交往時，老年人可能會更主動地採取他們的觀點，進而完成相應的行為。

關鍵詞：觀點採擇，年齡差異，動機觸發假設，實驗操縱