Empathy and Memory during the COVID-19 Pandemic and Effects of Aging

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Introduction
- Interactive relationship between emotion and cognition: Emotion can guide what to focus on and what to remember (Madan et al., 2017)
- Aging impacts emotion (e.g., empathy: Beadle & De la Vega, 2019) and memory.
- How are empathy, memory, and aging associated with each other during the pandemic when empathy plays a key role in one’s behaviors (Pfattheicher et al., 2020)?

Research Questions
- We investigated the relationship between individual differences in empathy (emotion) and one’s memory for details about the COVID-19 pandemic, and how aging impacts this relationship with the following questions:
  1. How are individual differences in empathy associated with memory?
  2. Are cognitive empathy and affective empathy differently associated with individuals’ memory?
  3. Do associations between empathy and memory differ with age?

Methods
- Participants: 393 US participants (ages 18-89) from the Boston College COVID-19 Dataset (Cunningham et al., 2021)
- Measures
  1. Empathy: Cognitive and Affective subscales from Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI)

Methods (cont)
- Memory: Four items about the # of confirmed cases in their country and their state by mid-March 2020 and by mid-April 2020, respectively.
- Memory DV 1 (Accuracy): the averaged absolute value of “participants’ response – actual number” (Lower values = greater memory accuracy)
- Memory DV 2 (Bias): the relative value of DV 1 (+: Overestimate, -: Underestimate)

Results
- Affective empathy ↑, memory accuracy on the COVID confirmed cases ↑ (p = .029)
- Affective empathy ↑, underestimation ↑ (marginally significant, p = .075)
- Cognitive empathy (not shown) was NOT significantly associated with memory accuracy or bias.
- Although age was negatively associated with cognitive and affective empathy (not shown), age was NOT significantly related to either memory accuracy or bias.

Discussion
- The preliminary results suggest an interaction between emotion and memory: A positive relationship between affective empathy and memory accuracy for the # of COVID cases.
- This implies that the motivation to care about others’ feelings might facilitate one’s tendency to more accurately remember relevant information.
- Age does not seem to impact the association between empathy and memory.

Results (cont)

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Reference

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