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It Takes One To Know One: Interpersonal Sensitivity is Related to
Accurate Assessments of Others' Interpersonal Sensitivity

Dana R. Carney

Northeastern University

Jinni A. Harrigan

California State University, Fullerton

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Abstract

Interpersonal sensitivity (emotional and social) is the ability to accurately assess others' abilities, states, and traits from nonverbal cues. We predicted that interpersonal sensitivity would be related to accurate judgments of friends' interpersonal sensitivity. 50 participants were recruited, each bringing a friend to participate in performance-based, self-report, and other-rating measures of *emotional* and *social* sensitivity. Interpersonal sensitivity was related to accurate judgments of others' interpersonal sensitivity (the "it takes one to know one effect"). Neither gender nor acquaintanceship was directly related to accurate judgments of interpersonal sensitivity nor did either variable moderate the "it takes one to know one effect."

It Takes One To Know One: Interpersonal Sensitivity is Related to
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The ability to make correct judgments about the abilities, traits, and states of others from nonverbal cues is an important social skill called *interpersonal sensitivity*. Interpersonal sensitivity, often conceptualized as an ability, is central to adaptive social functioning. Empirically, it has been shown that interpersonally sensitive individuals have more satisfying marriages (Noller & Feeney, 1994) and make better clinicians (Rosenthal, Hall, DiMatteo, Rogers, Archer, 1979), and interpersonally sensitive grade-school children are more liked by their peers (Nowicki & Duke, 1992). Theoretically, interpersonal sensitivity lies at the core of models of emotional and social intelligence where one *must* have basic interpersonal sensitivity skills to be emotionally or socially intelligent (see e.g., Mayer & Salovey, 1997). Although interpersonal sensitivity is theoretically related to the construct of emotional empathy, it is distinct from empathy in that empathy is defined as the extent to which one *feels* what others *feel*. Being empathic includes the ability to be interpersonally sensitive, but being interpersonally sensitive does not necessarily mean that one is empathic.

Embedded in the definition of interpersonal sensitivity is a research question that no published research has asked. If interpersonal sensitivity is an ability allowing the accurate judgment of others' abilities, traits, and states, then it makes sense to expect interpersonal sensitivity to be related to accurate assessments of others' interpersonal sensitivity. This question is the focus of the current article.

Interpersonal sensitivity can be classified into general domains such as *emotional* and *social* sensitivity. Emotional sensitivity is the ability to accurately assess nonverbal cues (such as those conveyed by face and or body) associated with emotion, where social sensitivity is

concerned with more global social information including (but not limited to) emotion, personality, and social role.

Both emotional and social sensitivity are measured with performance-based tests, self-reports, and informant-ratings (the “informant” can be anyone who has known the person for any length of time, such as a peer or teacher). Performance tests ask participants to view or listen to, and then rate, a series of stimulus pictures, audio clips, or video clips. Self-report measures ask participants to rate themselves on interpersonal sensitivity. And the use of informant-ratings involves asking others to rate the participants’ sensitivity.

Of these methods of measuring interpersonal sensitivity, one method, peer-ratings (a type of informant-rating), has not been the subject of much examination. Although peer-ratings of interpersonal sensitivity have been used to support the construct validity of two performance-based measures of interpersonal sensitivity -- the Interpersonal Perception Task (IPT; Costanzo & Archer, 1989) and the Profile of Nonverbal Sensitivity (PONS; Rosenthal et al., 1979) -- many performance-based measures of interpersonal sensitivity have not been validated with peer-ratings, and no research has examined individual difference variables that might predict one’s ability to accurately judge others’ interpersonal sensitivity.

Three factors likely to influence accurate assessments of another person’s interpersonal sensitivity are the interpersonal sensitivity level and gender of the judge, and the acquaintanceship between the judge and the to-be-rated person. As we pointed out, it makes sense to expect those high on interpersonal sensitivity to be more accurate judges of others’ interpersonal sensitivity. Additionally, research has shown that females are more accurate than males at assessing emotion (Brody, 1999; Hall, 1984; Rotter & Rotter, 1988), intelligence (Murphy, Hall, & Colvin, 2002), and personality characteristics (Vogt & Colvin, 2002) in others.

Finally, it has been shown that the better you know someone, the more accurate you are at assessing his or her emotions (Colvin, Vogt, & Ickes, 1997) and personality (Colvin, Vogt, & Ickes, 1997; Funder & Colvin, 1988).

The Current Study

The focus of the current article was to ask whether one's own interpersonal sensitivity was related to the accuracy of judging another's interpersonal sensitivity. To test this question, we measured participants' *emotional* and *social* sensitivity and predicted that as participants' emotional or social sensitivity increased, so would their ability to accurately judge how emotionally or socially sensitive another person would be (respectively). We also examined whether gender and/or acquaintanceship would be directly related to accuracy about a friend's sensitivity, and/or whether these variables would moderate the relationship between one's own sensitivity and one's ability to assess another's sensitivity.

Method

Participants

Thirty-five female and fifteen male participants were recruited from California State University, Fullerton and Northeastern University in Boston, Massachusetts (25 at each university). Each brought one friend (39 females and 11 males) whom they had been acquainted with for one year or more, making a total of 50 participant-friend pairs. Of the 50 participant-friend pairs, there were 28 female-female, 4 male-male, and 18 mixed-gender pairs. Participants at both universities received partial course credit for their participation, and friends were offered a chance to win a \$100.00 prize through a lottery conducted at each university. Participants and friends ranged in age from 18 to 46 years old ($M = 20$). Ethnicities of the participants and friends were 62% Caucasian, 22% Hispanic, 8% Asian, 5% African American, and 3% other/decline to

state. In this article, the recruited participants will be referred to as *participants*, and the friends brought to the study by participants will be referred to as *friends*.

Materials and Procedure

The participant-friend pairs were tested for approximately one hour in groups from 2 to 18. Respondents reported demographic information and rated the other on: (1) length of acquaintanceship in years/months, (2) how well they knew their friend, and (3) the depth of the friendship (the last two on a 5-point scale). Participants and friends also engaged in the following tasks (Cronbach's alpha coefficients for each measure can be seen in Table 1).

Performance-based emotional sensitivity. The Diagnostic Analysis of Nonverbal Accuracy (DANVA-2F; Nowicki & Duke, 1994) is a 24-item measure of emotion decoding accuracy. Respondents view pictures of 24 adults posing a facial expression of emotion for five seconds, and then choose the emotion word (happy, sad, angry, fearful) that best represents the facial expression. The number of items answered correctly is the accuracy score.

Self-reported emotional sensitivity. The Perceived Decoding Ability Scale, Form 2 (PDA2; Zuckerman & Larrance, 1979) is a 16-item self-report measure of ability to detect emotion from facial and vocal cues. Items such as "I can usually tell when someone is angry from that person's facial expressions" are rated on a scale from 1 (*not at all like me*) to 7 (*exactly like me*).

Peer-rated emotional sensitivity. The PDA2 (Zuckerman & Larrance, 1979) just described, was adapted into a peer-rating measure by changing items such as "I can usually tell when someone is angry from that person's facial expressions" into "My friend can usually tell when someone is angry from that person's facial expressions." Ratings are made on a scale from 1 (*not at all like my friend*) to 7 (*exactly like my friend*).

Performance-based social sensitivity. The Missing Cartoons Test (deMille, O'Sullivan, & Guilford, 1965) is a 28-item measure of social situation decoding ability in which respondents are asked to choose the missing cartoon segment that belongs in the four-segment cartoon strip. Each four-segment strip depicts an ambiguous social situation where one of the four segments is missing and the correct cartoon segment that completes the sequence is listed below the strip among three incorrect choices. The ambiguous social situations contain overt cues such as those associated with behavior, and less overt cues such as those associated with thoughts and feelings. The number of items answered correctly is the accuracy score.

Self-reported social sensitivity. A self-report measure of social sensitivity was adapted from a list of characteristics developed by Sternberg, Conway, Ketron, and Bernstein (1981) that were believed to characterize a socially or practically intelligent person.¹ The 16 items taken from Sternberg et al. were selected as self-report analogs to the performance-based measure just described. Each of the 16 characteristics, for example, “sizes up situations well,” was used in a sentence such as “I size up situations well.” Responses were made on a scale from 1 (*not like me at all*) to 7 (*exactly like me*).

Peer-rated social sensitivity. A peer-rating measure of social sensitivity was adapted from the self-report measure of social sensitivity just described. Items such as such as “I size up situations well” were changed to “My friend sizes up situations well.” Responses were made on a scale from 1 (*not at all like my friend*) to 7 (*exactly like my friend*).

Results

Preliminary Analyses

The variables of interest in the current study were participants' and friends' performance-based and self-reported emotional and social sensitivity, and participants' ratings of a friend's

sensitivity. A correlation matrix among these key variables can be found in Table 1, in which correlations of central interest are italicized.

We found that the two types of sensitivity were generally related within each measurement method (all except for the friends' performance-based sensitivity; see Table 1), suggesting that emotional and social sensitivity are related constructs when measured with the same method. Table 1 also shows that participants' and friends' performance-based sensitivity scores were related within a sensitivity domain; however, participants' and friends' self-reported sensitivity scores were not related within (or across) a sensitivity domain.

Research shows peer-reports of interpersonal sensitivity to be related to performance-based measures of interpersonal sensitivity (Costanzo & Archer, 1989; Rosenthal et al., 1979). However, no research has examined whether peer-ratings of interpersonal sensitivity were related to the two performance-based interpersonal sensitivity measures used in the current study. Table 1 shows that participants' ratings of a friend's emotional or social sensitivity were not related to that friend's performance-based emotional or social sensitivity (respectively), showing that for the DANVA and Missing Cartoons tasks, peer-reports do not converge with performance-based measures.

Researchers examining the validity of self-reported interpersonal sensitivity have shown very small correlations between self-reported and performance-based interpersonal sensitivity (Riggio & Riggio, 2001). The current study is no exception; Table 1 shows no relationship between participants' or friends' self-reported and performance-based sensitivity.

Who is Maximally Accurate About Others' Interpersonal Sensitivity?

To answer this question, we used linear multiple regression to predict participants' accuracy about friends' interpersonal sensitivity from the interpersonal sensitivity level and

gender of the participant, and the acquaintanceship between the participant-friend pair. In order to calculate an accuracy score to tell us, overall, how accurate participants were in judging their friends' emotional and social sensitivity, we standardized participants' ratings of their friend on both emotional and social sensitivity, as well as the friends' *actual* (i.e., performance-based) emotional and social sensitivity. An accuracy score was calculated for each participant by taking the absolute difference between participants' ratings of friends, and the friends' actual score within each sensitivity domain. In this calculation of accuracy, the lower the score, the more *agreement*, thus the better the accuracy (i.e., a smaller difference between participants' ratings of friends and friends' actual sensitivity) (see Hall, Carter, & Horgan, 2001 for prior use of this method). Each participant's interpersonal sensitivity, gender, and acquaintanceship to the friend could then be related to each accuracy score.

Acquaintanceship of each participant-friend pair was measured with the three acquaintanceship questions described in the method. Participants' and friends' ratings were averaged for each of these three acquaintanceship questions, and because responses to the three questions were highly related (mean $r = .59$), responses were standardized and averaged to make one composite variable.

There was no statistically significant combined effect of participants' gender, acquaintanceship, and emotional sensitivity on their accuracy about their friends' emotional sensitivity, $F(3, 46) = 1.66, p > .18 (SE = .86)$, although the model did account for some variance ($R^2 = .10$). However, there was a statistically significant unique effect of participants' emotional sensitivity on participants' accuracy about their friend's emotional sensitivity, $t(46) = -1.95, p < .06; r_p = -.27 (SE = .03)$, indicating that as participants' emotional sensitivity increased, so did their accurate judgment of their friend's emotional sensitivity.

There was a marginally significant combined effect of gender, acquaintanceship, and social sensitivity on participants' accuracy of judging their friends' social sensitivity, $F(3, 45) = 2.23, p < .10; R^2 = .13$. Again, there was a statistically significant unique effect of participants' social sensitivity, $t(45) = -2.57, p < .02; r_p = -.36 (SE = .02)$, indicating that as participants' social sensitivity increased, so did their accurate judgment of their friend's social sensitivity.

The relationships between participants' emotional and social sensitivity and their accurate judgments of their friends' emotional and social sensitivity were the focus of this study and were the only statistically significant predictors of accuracy about their friends' emotional and social sensitivity.² Therefore, for ease of presentation, the zero-order correlations between participants' emotional and social sensitivity and the accuracy of judging their friends' emotional and social sensitivity are shown in Table 2. Note that the relationships between participants' emotional and social sensitivity and the analogous accuracy score are much stronger than the non-analogous relationships demonstrating that within an interpersonal sensitivity domain, an interpersonally sensitive individual can assess a friend's level of interpersonal sensitivity, which we will call the "it takes one to know one effect."³

Do Acquaintanceship or Gender Moderate the "It Takes One to Know One Effect"?

To answer each of these questions, linear multiple regression was used to test whether there was an interaction effect of each potential moderator with participants' emotional and social sensitivity on accuracy about emotional and social sensitivity (respectively). There was no evidence to suggest that acquaintanceship moderated the relation between participants' emotional sensitivity and accuracy about a friend's emotional sensitivity because there was no unique effect of the interaction term, $t(45) = .83, p > .40; r_p = .12 (SE = .06)$. There was also no

evidence that acquaintanceship moderated this relation within the domain of social sensitivity, $t(45) = .54, p > .59; r_p = .08 (SE = .03)$.

There was also no evidence that gender moderated the relation between participants' emotional sensitivity and ratings of a friend's emotional sensitivity, $t(45) = -.14, p > .89; r_p = -.02 (SE = .10)$, nor was there evidence of moderation within the domain of social sensitivity, $t(45) = -1.22, p > .22; r_p = -.17 (SE = .05)$.

Discussion

The current study primarily examined whether interpersonal sensitivity was related to accuracy of judging a friend's interpersonal sensitivity. Consistent with our predictions, we found that the more interpersonally sensitive a participant was, the more accurate their assessment of a friend's interpersonal sensitivity, and this "it takes one to know one effect" was found for both emotional and social sensitivity. And, this relationship did not cross sensitivity domains, that is, participants' level of *emotional* sensitivity was not related to the accurate assessment of their friend's *social* sensitivity, and participants' *social* sensitivity was only slightly (but not significantly) related to the accurate judgment of a friend's *emotional* sensitivity. The relation between social sensitivity and some degree of accuracy in judging a friends' emotional sensitivity makes sense because social sensitivity includes, both conceptually and operationally, sensitivity to emotion.

Although peer-ratings of interpersonal sensitivity have been used to validate standardized measures of interpersonal sensitivity (Costanzo & Archer, 1989; Rosenthal et al., 1979), no research has reported on this type of validity for the performance-based measures of interpersonal sensitivity used in the current study. We found no relation between participants' ratings of friends' sensitivity and friends' actual sensitivity. Although this might lead one to

question the validity of these measures, evidence of convergent validity was found in that one's own score on each of the sensitivity measures was related to accuracy about another's sensitivity within a sensitivity domain (i.e., emotional sensitivity was related to sensitivity about emotional sensitivity, and the same for social sensitivity).

Until now, almost nothing was known about individual difference variables that were related to reports of another person's interpersonal sensitivity and that person's actual interpersonal sensitivity. The current study points out that the interpersonal sensitivity of the judge is related to accurate judgments of others' interpersonal sensitivity. And, although prior research suggested that gender (Brody, 1999; Hall, 1984; Rotter & Rotter, 1988) and acquaintanceship (Colvin, Vogt, & Ickes, 1997; Funder & Colvin, 1988) would be related to accuracy about a friend's sensitivity, the current study did not find support for the direct influence of either of these factors. Nor did we find evidence that either factor moderated the "it takes one to know one effect."

On a theoretical note, research has begun to distinguish the different domains of interpersonal sensitivity (see Hall & Bernieri, 2001 for a review), and our research shows that although different domains of interpersonal sensitivity are related, they are not entirely overlapping. Also of theoretical interest is the fact that emotional and social sensitivity are related to successfully judging those who have the specific type of interpersonal sensitivity that you have, a further indication that perhaps interpersonal sensitivity is a class of interrelated but domain specific skills.

It is also important to note that the different sensitivity constructs (emotional and social) were more related, overall, to each other within a method of measurement (e.g., performance-based) than two methods of measurement (e.g., performance-based and self-report) within a

single construct (e.g., emotional sensitivity). This pattern of findings suggests that the multitrait correlations within a single method may be artificially inflated by shared method variance (see Campbell & Fiske, 1959). Additionally, because the multitrait-single method correlations are much higher, on average, than the single-trait multimethod correlations, there is evidence for a lack of convergent validity for each of the constructs being measured (Campbell & Fiske, 1959).

One criticism of the current research could be that the “it takes one to know one effect” is a function of projecting one’s own level of interpersonal sensitivity onto the person being rated. However, consistent with prior research (see Riggio & Riggio, 2001 for a review), the participants did not know how interpersonally sensitive they were, and could not, therefore, have used that information in rating a friend.

It should be noted that the “it takes one to know one effect,” in this study, was limited to participant-friend pairs and whether this relation will be found when persons do not know each other well is an open question.

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Author Note

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