



## SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

Mendzheritskaya J.A.

### Empathic Accuracy in Poly-Ethnic Interaction

*This study examines empathic accuracy under the perspective of intercultural communication. The accent is made on consideration of the concept of empathic accuracy and analysis of empirical findings related to impact of situational variables on empathic accuracy in interpersonal communication. Theoretical background consists of modern approaches to phenomenon of empathy as multi-component social-psychological personality trait. The study is aimed at determination and empirical examination of situational variables that have the most effect on valence empathic accuracy in conflict poly-ethnic interaction.*

*The findings reveal the combined effects of a number of situational variables on valence empathic accuracy: partner's gender, content of interaction, group membership and interaction conflict potential. In conclusion the conflict patterns of valence empathic accuracy in interaction with a partner of another ethnic out-group are described.*

**Keywords:** *empathy, valence and content accuracy, intercultural interaction, conflict communication*

Cognitive, stabilising, preventive, defensive and other functions of empathic ability defined as ability to give an emotional response on distressed other, to recognise his feelings and thoughts, to choose an appropriate behavioural reaction in order to minimise the suffer of the partner, were well analysed in a number of researches that belongs to different investigation traditions (for review see [4]). At the same time the role of empathy in conflict and aggressive interaction has not been studied well enough yet [5; 10; 28].

Only in few researchers the attempt was made to examine the impact of situational factors of conflict and non-conflict communication on empathic response [27; 31]. It is underlined that the shift from the studying of the effects of stable personality characteristics on empathic accuracy to the understanding of the role of situational factors in these processes is the main trend in the modern empathy research. This approach reflects the social-psychological nature of empathy and its interpersonal background [27; 31].

Basing on named above statements the present research is aimed at: 1) consideration of theoretical concepts of empathic accuracy; 2) analysis of existed empirical results concerning impact of situational factors on empathic accuracy in interpersonal interaction; 3) definition and experimental verification of hypothesised impact of situational factors on empathic accuracy in conflict interpersonal interaction.



Investigation of empathic accuracy has a long history. In clinical and psychotherapeutic praxis empathic accuracy was determined as one of the most important indices of successful psychotherapy [2; 8; 16; 24]. Some personality researchers [12; 21; 25] devoted their work during a long period of time to the development of valid self-report measure of empathic accuracy. As it was mentioned earlier in communication research a lot of attention was paid to the role of empathic accuracy in successful interpersonal interaction [1; 3; 26].

In his review Ickes et al [23] stressed that such terms as «discrimination ability», «perceptive accuracy», «social acuity» and «social intellect» were used as synonyms for the term «empathic accuracy». Another American psychologist Duan [13] suggested to describe empathic accuracy through congruency of empathic response in order to point out the similarity of feelings and thoughts between observer and target. Accumulating most distinguishing features empathic accuracy could be defined as 1) ability 2) to understand, interpret, and infer 3) accurately 4) in thoughts, feelings and behaviour reasons 5) of the other.

It is worthy to mention that in above listed synonymous terms the accent is done on cognitive elements of empathic accuracy. Affective aspects of empathic accuracy are studied in some investigations of Davis [12]. He pointed out that there are two types of empathic response on partner's feelings – parallel and reactive empathic response. Parallel empathic response relates to observer's emotional response that completely repeats or goes along with experiences of the target. For example, the observer responds with fear when the target is frightened, and with sorrow when the target is upset.

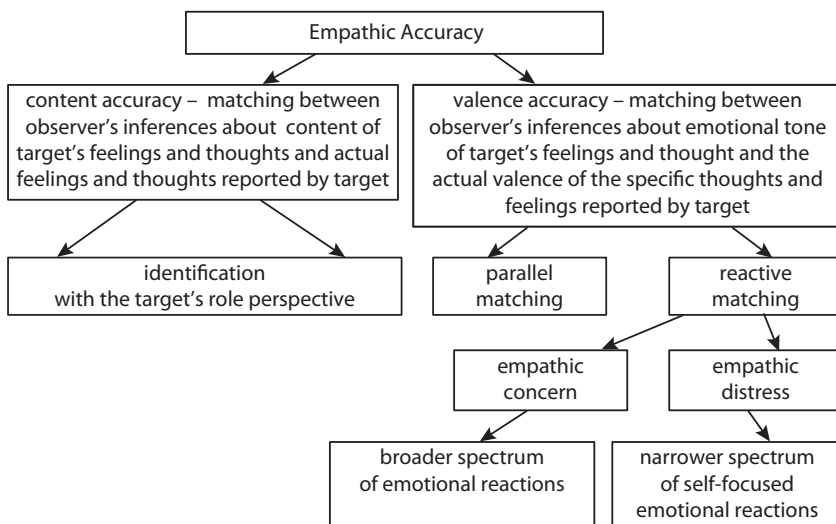
In comparison to parallel type of empathic response the reactive type includes observer's emotional reaction on target's feeling that has more reflexive character and includes the attitude of the observer towards the partner's feelings and thoughts. The reactive type of empathic response has two subtypes. First subtype is defined as empathic concern and relates to more wide spectrum of affective reactions of sympathy, shame or anger that observer could experience, for example, towards unfairly abused target. Another subtype of reactive empathic response is determined as «empathic distress». It manifests itself in self-focused affective reactions of narrower spectrum. For example, the observer reacts with frustration, unease and anxiety on feelings of the target. Eisenberg et al [15] suppose that parallel emotional reactions are more automotive and dominate at the first stage of empathic response. At the same time they have the preparatory function for the next coming stage of reactive empathic response.

With the aim to combine various interpretations of the phenomenon of empathic accuracy Ickes [21] proposed his own definition of empathic accuracy in which he follows the recent trend in the sphere of empathy research [7; 9; 12; 14; 18] and underlined the multi-component affective-cognitive structure of empathy. Ickes [21] determined two forms of empathic accuracy – content accuracy and valence accuracy. Content accuracy is understood as matching between observer's description of the inferred



content of target's feelings and thoughts and actual feelings and thoughts reported by target. Valence accuracy refers to the degree to which observer's inferences about emotional tone of target's feelings and thoughts match the actual valence of the specific thoughts and feelings reported by target. Content accuracy, in comparison to valence accuracy, requires more intensive preliminary intellectual processing of inferred contents of target's reactions, whereas in the background of the valence accuracy more automatic and immediate reactions on target's feelings and thoughts operate.

The combination of two approaches to classification of empathic accuracy types developed by Ickes [21] and Davis [12] is represented in the original scheme below (Picture 1).



Pic. 1. Types of empathic accuracy

The most investigated situational factors influencing the empathic accuracy include both characteristics of target and characteristics of situation: 1) similarity between observer and target; 2) target's attractiveness; 3) observer's and target's membership in the same social group (professional or ethnic/cultural group); 4) motivation to show empathic responses; 5) readability of target's emotional states; 6) valence of partner's emotional states; 7) content of interaction situation; 8) emotional expressivity of partner; 9) partner's gender; 10) attitude towards the partner; 11) context of partner's experiences [12; 13; 15; 17; 19; 20; 21; 31].

The experimental design applied in the frameworks of this research tradition aimed at analysis of influence of similarity between observer and target on empathic accuracy includes instructions according to which one aspect of the observer's personal experience is perceived as similar (or different) to the target's experience. The



findings [12] suggest that similarity of social experience (for example, participation in the same experiment, or identical results in psychological tests) is positively associated with higher matching between emotional reactions of the observer on emotional states of the target and target's actual understanding of his/her feelings and thoughts. According to the above described distinction between parallel and reactive empathic response [12;15] this empathic reaction could be classified as parallel empathic response.

From the other side it was shown [21] that the impact of similarity in scientific interests and achievements as far as the effect of identical value orientations on empathic accuracy is dependent on the content of emotion elicited situation. In the case when the target experiences negative emotions caused by his/her desire to be independent the mentioned above effect of similarity variable is less significant as in situation when the target was rejected from the beloved one.

Higgins [21] used in his experiments the similarity between observer and target in the sphere of personal problems. He could also demonstrate the clear association between increasing of reactive empathic response and high level of personal vulnerability similarity.

The researchers' opinion about association between empathic accuracy and empathic distress is diverse. In a number of earlier studies [12] the link between observer-target similarity and empathic distress was demonstrated with the same high evidence as in relation to empathic concern.

In more recent studies of Houston [20] it is stressed that similarity variable does not have a linear interconnection with increasing of empathic distress. Houston [20] analysed the effect of two similarity types referred to two forms of personality incongruence – discrepancy between real and ideal self and discrepancy between real and ought self respectively. He found out that similarity in personal discrepancy between the observer and the target does not increase the level of empathic distress. Empathic distress is connected with the degree of discrepancy in the observer's self-concept. Observer who is characterised with high self-concept discrepancy is blind towards the feelings of the partner. Taken together the data testifies that the observer's high personality vulnerability is one of the leading mechanisms in the processes of empathic distress. In opposite, empathic concern is associated with similarity in self-incongruence type between observer and target.

Ickes considered in his overview [21] the influence of «readability» of partner's emotional states and the nature of association between observer and target (degree of acquaintance) in relation to empathic accuracy. He stated that «unreadability» of partner's emotional states diminish empathic accuracy. Under «unreadability» Ickes understood inconsistency of partner's emotional states, affective ambivalence of emotions communicated from partner, the desire to hide or suppress own feelings, the wish to show only socially desirable feelings.

Another set of experiments [17] revealed that content and valence empathic accuracy independent from individual's gender is 50% higher when the target and observ-



er are friends. Researchers concluded that friendship supposes deeper understanding of partner's experiences that becomes in its turn an important factor in increasing of matching between observer's and target's emotional reactions.

Association between observer's empathic accuracy and emotional expressivity is discussed in the study of Zaki et al [31]. Emotional expressivity is defined as individual's tendency to behave in accordance with his/her experienced emotions. Emotional expressivity has positive impact on observer's empathic accuracy.

In a very small body of empathy research the attention is paid to the analysis of interaction between several listed above variables and empathic accuracy. For example, Holz-Ebeling and Steinmetz [19] studied impact of following situational factors on empathic accuracy: 1) attitude towards the partner (positive vs. negative); 2) type of partner's experiences (thoughts, feelings or needs); 3) valence of partner's emotional states (positive vs. negative); 4) partner's gender.

Authors came to the conclusion that positive attitude towards the partner had an positive effect on empathic accuracy. The negative attitude towards partner could also increase the empathic accuracy only in condition when partner experiences intensive negative emotions connected with frustration of his needs. The effect of partner's experience type has following tendency: the observer reacts with higher empathic accuracy only on partner's negative feelings which reflect his unrealised wishes or unsatisfied needs. In comparison to male partner the affective experiences of female partner evoke more accurate empathic responses. The lowest empathic accuracy was registered in relation to male partner to whom the observer has negative attitude. It was also shown that negative valence of partner's feelings is associated with increasing of observer's empathic accuracy. The effect of negative valence is stronger when observer's attitude towards partner was negative and partner reported about unsatisfied needs.

Another association between valence of target's emotional states and observer's empathic accuracy was revealed in the research of Duan [13]. The results demonstrate that accuracy (congruency) of empathic reactions is dependent on valence and subjective attractiveness of target's emotional states. She analysed the impact of three positive emotional states (happiness, pride, and release) and three negative emotional states (sadness, shame, and anger). All three studied positive emotions and only one negative emotion – sadness, have positive effect on empathic accuracy. According to Duan [13] the explanation of revealed association is based on the subjective pleasantness of these emotions and general tendency of individuals to show congruent reactions when partner experiences positive and subjective pleasant emotions.

In her meta-analysis Steins [29] made an attempt to determine the impact of partner's attractiveness and conflict potential of interaction on relation between content and valence empathic accuracy. Results testify that content and valence empathic accuracy do not correlate when partner is perceived as less attractive and the conflict potential of interaction is low. If one of the parameters (partner's attractiveness or conflict potential of interaction) is high, then association between content and valence



empathic accuracy is strong. When partner is highly attractive for the observer and the possibility of conflict interaction is high, then content and valence empathic accuracy correlates negatively. Summarising the data show that, firstly, the high level of valence empathic accuracy does not always predict the high level of content empathic accuracy and vice versa. Secondly, the same situational variables have difference impact on manifestation of valence and content empathic accuracy.

The influence of conflict communication on changes in empathic accuracy was also studied in one of our researches [6]. Results revealed that in interaction situation that threaten observer's psychological unity and personality safety the empathic accuracy is low and is characterised through inversion, narrowness and cross-situational inconsistency.

In addition to other situational variables Ickes et al [22] found that empathic accuracy of male participants is lower if the experimental instruction includes words that are associated with the phenomenon of empathy, for example, compassion, emotional response, emotional sensitivity etc. Researches found that the lower empathic accuracy in male subjects was always displayed when investigation goals were open declared. They explained this association in relation to lower male motivation to react empathic because they are afraid to be out of male gender role and not to correspond to the social desirable behaviour pattern accepted in the society.

Ambiguous results in relation to the role of group membership variable in the processes of empathic accuracy reported Stürmer et al [30]. Researchers pointed out that chronic or induced group membership, for example, to the same ethnic in-group, increases the valence empathic accuracy, whereas absence of ethnic similarity positive effects the content empathic accuracy and at the same time diminishes the valence accuracy of empathic response. It is underlined that differentiating effect of group membership on content and valence empathic accuracy is related to different mechanisms which initiate and accompany the processes of interaction with the member of in- and out-group.

Summarising the mentioned above finding from different spheres of empathy research it is worthy to conclude that 1) the most promising approach to the analysis of situational variables effect on empathic accuracy includes consideration of impact of various situational variables; 2) the influence of conflict interaction on valence empathic accuracy, and especially, on degree of empathic distress is not sufficient studied; 3) the attention is paid to the observer's and target's group membership and to the association of group membership with empathic accuracy under the perspective of chronic culture [11].

In the present research we made an accent, firstly, on experimental examination of combined effects of such variables as partner's gender, content of interaction situation, partner's ethnicity and conflict probability on degree of valence empathic accuracy, and, secondly, on description of conflict interaction patterns of valence empathic accuracy variability in poly- and mono-ethnic interaction caused by mentioned in 1) situational variables.

The set of tasks was modified for the purposes of assessment of the valence empathic accuracy in interaction situations [6], in which the interaction type was varied



in accordance with examined situational variables: 1) content of interaction (rejection/ offence/ limitation/ accusation); 2) group membership (high vs. low degree of similarity); 3) partner's gender (female vs. male); 4) conflict potential of interaction (high vs. low conflict probability).

Each participant received a set of depicted situations that display an interaction of target with another person who frustrates target's social needs. According to instruction participants should imagine themselves as if they were the witnesses of depicted interaction situation and describe their reactions towards the «victim». Further on the instruction contains information about the probability of conflict between observer and «victim». The participants received either the possibility to react in direction that could increase the potential conflict or diminish it. Each interaction situation was divided in relation to context into «reject-situations», «accusation-situations», «offence-situations» and «limitation- situation».

The group membership (ethnic group) of the target was identified both in the instruction and in stimulus material. The possible ethnic out-groups were chosen basing on the index of psychological distance between the members of majority ethnic group (Russians, in-group) and other minority ethnic groups (out-groups). Taking into account the ethnical specifics of Rostov region, where the study was conducted, there were selected minority groups with different psychological distance towards majority group: Armenians, Azerbaijanians, and Tatars.

Participants were asked to react emotionally to target's feelings by choosing of appropriate facial expression picture from the set. For this purpose participants became a set of 9 pictures displayed male and female faces expressing emotions of different valence.

As measure for integral characteristics of valence empathic accuracy in interaction situation were taken: 1) valence empathic accuracy assessed as a number of the observer's empathic concern responses matched in valence with emotional states of the target; 2) valence empathic accuracy assessed as a number of the observer's empathic distress responses (self-focused responses) unmatched in valence with emotional states of the target.

84 participants, students of two universities in Rostov-on-Don (26 males and 58 females) in the age of 19- 22 took part in the investigation. The collection of data was realised in the frameworks of INTAS - Grant (No: YSF 01/1-199).

Results of regression analysis conducted separately for each of the examined situational variables used as predictors revealed that 1) conflict interaction effects negatively the degree of empathic concern responses and positively the degree of empathic distress responses; 2) partner's female gender effects positively both empathic concern and empathic distress; 3) statistical significant was the impact of the situation «offence» on increasing of empathic distress and decreasing of empathic concern; 4) target's group membership in out-group diminishes significantly both empathic concern and empathic distress.

Because the main purpose of the present research belongs to the studying of patterns of empathic accuracy in conflict interaction the additional analysis was aimed



to the combined effects of situational variables on empathic accuracy in the condition with high conflict probability between observer and target. According to the established tradition in the sphere of empathy research it seems worthy to group the obtained results in relation to participants' gender.

Thus, empathic concern and empathic distress of male participants (Diagram 1) in situations with high conflict probability is effected by a number of situational variables that are not correlated (correlation coefficient between  $r = 0.29$  and  $r = 0.24$  for different variables). Empathic concern significantly decreases when female target is observed in «rejection» and «limitation» situations ( $t = 2,821$ ,  $\alpha = 0,01$ ).

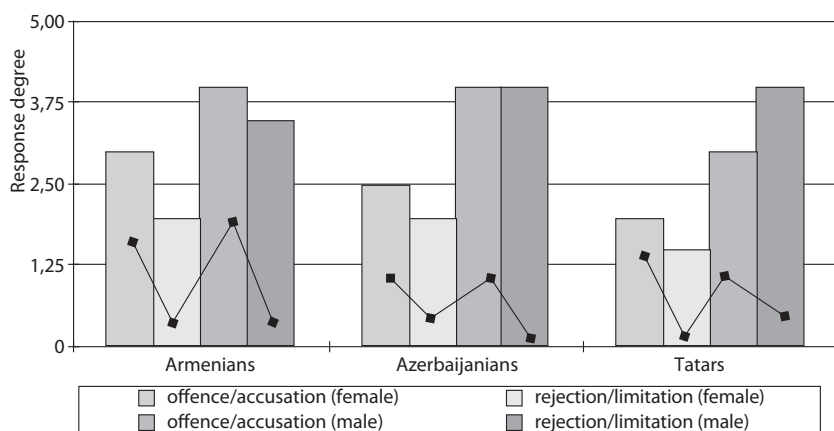


Diagram 1. Degree of empathic concern and empathic distress of male participants in interaction situation with high conflict probability in relation to partner's gender, ethnic out-group membership and interaction context (black line displays empathic distress).

Empathic distress of male observers increases only in interaction with female target independent of her out-group membership and context of interaction ( $t = -2,672$ ,  $\alpha = 0,14$ ). It should be mentioned that with the increasing of psychological distance towards target's out-group the empathic concern diminishes ( $t = 2,065$ ,  $\alpha = 0,50$ ) and empathic distress grows ( $t = -3,347$ ,  $\alpha = 0,03$ ) (Diagram 1).

In the group of female participants (Diagram 2) empathic concern and empathic distress are related to each other and show both positive (correlation coefficient between  $r = 0.55$  and  $r = 0.60$ ) and negative correlation (correlation coefficient between  $r = -0.30$  and  $r = -0.51$ ) dependent on conditions. Empathic concern and empathic distress grow in the condition when female target independent of her out-group membership interacts in the situation «rejection/limitation» ( $t = 3,495$  и  $t = -3,488$ ,  $\alpha = 0,001$ ) or when male target is observed in the situation «accusation/offence» ( $t = 4,033$  и  $t = -3,912$ ,  $\alpha = 0,000$ ).



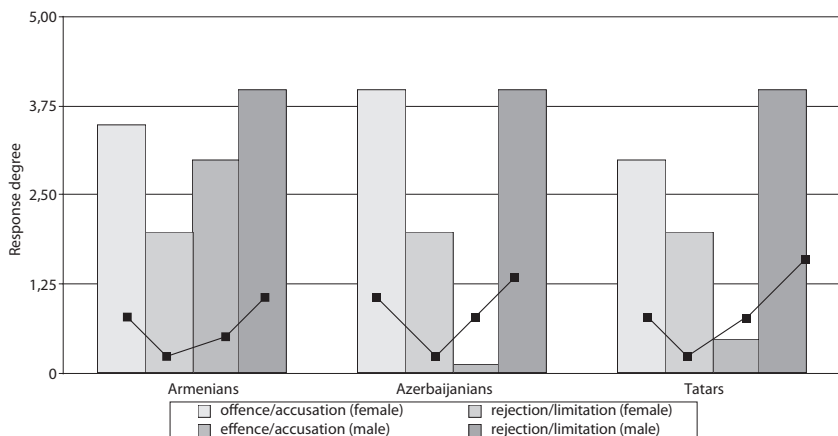


Diagram 2. Degree of empathic concern and empathic distress of female participants in interaction situation with high probability of conflict in relation to partner's gender, ethnic out-group membership and interaction context (black line displays empathic distress).

The increasing of psychological distance towards the target's out-group effected the growth of empathic distress reactions and diminishes the empathic concern reactions. This tendency is most evident in the condition with male target ( $t = -3,384$ ,  $\alpha = 0,003$ ). The smallest degree of empathic concern and empathic distress is displayed by female observers while interacting with female target in situation «limitation/rejection» ограничения ( $t = -2,118$ ,  $\alpha = 0,05$ , and  $t = -2,766$ ,  $\alpha = 0,04$ ) (Diagram 2).

Results allow to conclude that male conflict pattern of valence empathic accuracy is characterised through general tendency to minimise emotional participation in negative emotional experiences of a partner both in form of empathic concern and in form of empathic distress. The strongest effect on valence empathic accuracy in interaction with the partner of ethnic out-group has partner's female gender. The main characteristic of female conflict pattern of valence empathic accuracy consists of higher and more differentiated association between empathic response and situational factors. The strongest impact on valence empathic accuracy in interaction with the partner of ethnic out-group has situation context and partner's gender. Thus, it is typical for conflict interaction situation with the partner of ethnic out-group that the observer tends to establish emotional distance and focus on his/her own emotional experience that manifests in decreasing of empathic concern and increasing of empathic distress and grows proportionally in relation to the psychological and social dissimilarity between observer and target.



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