

Aging Revitalizes Nonverbal Challenges

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Published online: 24 July 2011
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A little over 10 years ago, the *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior* published a Special Issue on Aging and Nonverbal Behavior. The introductory remarks called for greater attention to age-related questions in the nonverbal field not only because of the dramatic demographic age shifts which were occurring, but also because it could serve as a testing ground for assumptions concerning the correlates, determinants, and consequences of nonverbal behavior. Over the intervening years, tremendous developments have taken place in the study of aging, especially regarding emotion-related issues such as changes in aging adults' perception of emotional information. The feature paper by Isaacowitz and Stanley (2011) in the present Special Issue is evidence of these changes and offers theorists and researchers exciting challenges for the study of aging and emotion recognition in the coming years. Commentaries by other scholars echo these challenges and suggest even more ways the study of aging and nonverbal behavior revitalizes attention to basic nonverbal questions and methodological strategies.

In their review of accumulating knowledge about differences in younger and older adults' emotion recognition accuracy, Isaacowitz and Stanley describe where various approaches have fallen short in either their assumptions or strategies for testing mechanisms underlying purported age differences. For example, brain-based approaches which stress the mediating role of changes in neural substrates often do not consider explicitly the extent to which implicated brain regions are impacted by normal aging. Phillips and Slessor (2011) add that much is to be learned about the contribution of other age-related neural functions such as executive control. Ruffman (2011) expands on the neuropsychological view with responses to ecological questions raised by Isaacowitz and Stanley regarding the use of still photos and passive identification methods common in neuroimaging studies.

Isaacowitz and Stanley argue further that motivational approaches have much to gain from considering research strategies which capture motivational mediators more directly. And, research paradigms need to be expanded to include broader measures of emotion

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perception, more expansive considerations of context, and more conceptually-driven strategies for selecting stimuli. Charles and Campos (2011) reaffirm these recommendations and remind us that expecting any single explanation for age differences is simplistic. Moreover, reviewing lessons learned from cross-cultural and gender-based nonverbal research may offer suggestions about tackling particular age-related challenges.

One universal concern emphasized by all of the authors in this Special Issue is the essential need for researchers to question the fundamental implications of differences in emotion recognition accuracy for everyday interpersonal functioning in older adults. Do differences in performance on emotion perception tasks have predictive validity for how aging adults successfully move through their daily lives? Addressing this question will require innovative attention to how success is pragmatically conceptualized and measured.

I am confident that the works brought together in this Special Issue on Aging and Nonverbal Behavior will provide researchers with instructive insights about how to approach ongoing and new challenges, and I look forward to seeing what new insights are uncovered about aging and nonverbal behavior in the years to come.

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