

Older is not always wiser when it comes to social gaffes

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Older people have more difficulty detecting the social gaffes of others and this is due to an age-related decline in their emotion perception skills, new University of Otago research suggests.

In an experiment newly published in the US journal *Psychology and Aging*, Department of Psychology researchers including Jamin Halberstadt, Ted Ruffman and Janice Murray compared the ability of older and younger adults to distinguish socially appropriate from inappropriate behaviour depicted in the UK sitcom *The Office*.

The study's 121 participants, of whom 60 were aged 18-35 and the remainder aged over 60, were asked to rate how socially appropriate the character David Brent's behaviour was in 16 video clips from the sitcom. Half of the clips depicted Brent acting appropriately and half showed him making faux pas.

Participants also undertook a battery of tests to gauge their emotion recognition skills and general cognitive ability. The emotion tests measured how well participants could perceive emotions expressed facially, vocally and through body postures.

Associate Professor Halberstadt says those aged over 60 were found to be not as good as young adults at differentiating when Brent was acting appropriately or committing a gaffe. Older adults also showed poorer performance on the battery of emotion recognition tests.

“What’s more, further analysis showed that older adults’ poorer performance on the faux pas task could be fully explained by their decline in emotion recognition abilities,” he says.

The Otago study is the first ever to examine [age](#) differences in the ability to distinguish gaffes from appropriate social behaviour while also measuring emotion recognition skills.

Previous Otago research has also shown that over 60-year-olds are worse at recognising anger, sadness and often fear, on the faces of others and are also not as good at detecting dangerous faces as younger people are.

“An important question raised by our latest research is how emotion recognition difficulties and difficulties detecting faux pas might affect social functioning in the real world.”

Being unable to make distinctions between socially appropriate and inappropriate behaviour could, for example, harm social relationships and contribute to social isolation, he says.

“Understanding age-related changes in emotion recognition and social skills can provide insight into the aging process and ways to improve elderly people’s quality of life.”

More information: *Psychology and Aging*, Emotion Perception Explains Age-Related Differences in the Perception of Social Gaffes, Jamin Halberstadt, Ted Ruffman, Janice Murray, Mele Taumoepeau, and Melissa Ryan, [DOI:10.1037/a0021366](https://doi.org/10.1037/a0021366)

Provided by University of Otago

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