

EMOTIONAL PROCESSING IN VERY OLD ADULTS: FINDINGS FROM THE ALTER STUDY

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Current evidence suggests that old people are less accurate than young adults in their ability to identify Emotional Facial Expressions (EFEs). Recent findings point out that deficits on EFEs decoding can partially be explained by impairments of the cognitive processes relevant to the task. The Alter study aims to investigate the ability of young, old (65-80 years old) and very old adults (>90 years old) to correctly identify EFEs under several conditions, especially when the task requires cognitive resources. However, this ability has remained unexplored in very old adults. In the present work we investigated the ability to identify 6 emotions (happiness, surprise, disgust, fear, anger, and sadness) in two groups: old and very old adults. We examined each group in a forced recognition task varying in difficulty. Task difficulty was defined by the intensity (a 3-point scale) and the number of Action Units (FACS, Ekman & Friesen, 1978) involved in each emotion. Results showed that accuracy depended on the number of Action Units and intensity, but not for all emotions. The number of EFEs correctly identified by the very old adults was lower than that identified by old adults in all emotions with negative valence, especially in sadness. As far as intensity is concerned, results showed that healthy aging is not especially vulnerable. Current findings suggest that task difficulty moderates age differences in emotion identification. The present study has contributed to previous research by illuminating the conditions under which age differences in the accuracy of labeling of EFEs are more likely to be observed.