**CAN POOR EMPATHic SKILLS BE EXPLAINED BY COGNITIVE FLEXIBILITY DEFICITS IN DEPRESSION?**

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Cognitive theories posit that depression could be characterized by cognitive flexibility deficits. Furthermore, studies showed poorer empathic skills in depression. As functional empathy requires to switch from self to others’ perspective, the purpose of this study is to investigate the role of mental flexibility in empathic deficits.

To this aim, we recruited a sample of 30 women, aged 18 to 23. To assess behavioral affective empathy (AE) and cognitive empathy (CE), participants performed the Multifaceted Empathy Test (MET), which consists of photographs depicting people in emotionally charged situations. Subjects had to rate pictures’ arousal, protagonists’ emotional states and their level of distress toward these. Afterwards, they completed a local-global (LG) task measuring cognitive flexibility. In the emotional condition, happy and sad faces where displayed behind local and global forms, whereas no faces appeared in non-emotional condition.

Results showed that subjective empathy (Basic Empathy Scale) was negatively correlated with depression (Beck Depression Inventory-II) and flexibility in sad context. MET scores revealed better recognition for negative emotions (specially sadness) in higher levels of depression. LG scores highlighted flexibility deficits in participants with higher levels of depression in the non-emotional condition and when they were processing happy faces. Furthermore, they performed better when processing sad faces in the local condition, while worse scores were obtained in the global one. Flexibility in positive context tends to be impaired when participants rate more intensely others’ negative emotions and feel more distress toward them. This partial role of mental flexibility in empathic skills will be discussed.