



# Catching Mind Readers in the Act

## Researchers get a feel for empathy's ups and downs

By BRUCE BOWER

A paper banner spans the wall above two video monitors in a psychology laboratory at the University of Texas at Arlington. With a touch of self-parody, the banner proclaims the research agenda of William Ickes and his coworkers: "Voyeurism Is Our Business—Our Only Business."

As it turns out, systematic voyeurism may give scientists a stimulating glimpse of social communication, up close and personal. For his part, Ickes transformed a passion for people-watching into a method of measuring empathic accuracy, the ability of one person to infer the thoughts and feelings of another person whom he or she has talked with or observed.

Studies conducted by Ickes and others over the past 6 years suggest that individuals often attain considerable empathic accuracy with friends, lovers, and even strangers. Moreover, men and women read the thoughts and feelings of others about equally well, despite the superiority usually assigned to "women's intuition."

Although empathy helps to fuse social connections, plenty of room exists for misunderstanding others, investigators find. About one empathic inference in four proves correct among strangers, and this rate shoots up considerably in close, long-standing relationships.

Some individuals regularly achieve far more empathic accuracy than others, but investigators find that nearly everyone overestimates his or her adeptness at this skill. Evidence exists that people given feedback on their empathic hits and misses rapidly learn to infer others' thoughts and feelings with greater accuracy. In addition, even highly empathic folks may encounter situations in which they totally misread a romantic partner in an apparently unconscious attempt to keep the alliance afloat.

"Empathic accuracy must be carefully managed because of its potential to hurt as well as to heal, to cause injury as well as to avoid or ameliorate it," Ickes holds. "People attempt to navigate through the perilous waters of knowing what they

should know, and not knowing what they shouldn't know, about their partners' ongoing thoughts and feelings."

In the early 1970s, Ickes navigated through perilous waters of personal disenchantment with social psychology. Many studies at the time, he contends, subtly prompted participants to respond in ways that matched experimenters' expectations.

Investigators often instructed volunteers to focus either on internal sources of information, such as the extent to which a person adheres to typical male or female sex roles, or external sources, such as the fact that someone was observed during a job interview, before rendering opinions about that individual's personality. Not surprisingly, social behavior showed strong ties to personality traits in such internal studies and to situational forces in the external ones.

Prompting took a darker turn in experiments that placed volunteers in tightly structured situations where they played out predetermined roles, according to the Texas psychologist. In one highly publicized study, male undergraduates took on identities as either inmates or guards in a simulated prison on a university campus; hostile acts between prisoners and their keepers accelerated rapidly, and the project was halted in its early stages.

Taking a cue from critics in sociology who described such research as theatrical productions directed by researchers, Ickes pursued an interest in how thoughts and behaviors percolate in spontaneous encounters between people.

This led him eventually to empathy's doorstep.

Researchers have often attempted to measure empathy in narrowly defined laboratory tests. Ickes' strategy is instead to trigger a spontaneous discussion between two people and at its conclusion gauge the degree to which they agree about what one another thought and felt at specific times.

First, an experimenter leads two volun-

teers to a room and leaves them alone together on a couch for 6 minutes. The door is left open, and a videocamera hidden in a room across the hall records what the participants say and do. When the experimenter returns, he or she tells them that they have been videotaped and gives them the option of continuing with the study or opting out and having the tape erased.

If both people decide to go on, each of them is shown the videotape in a separate cubicle. Each stops the recording at points where he or she remembers having had a thought or feeling and writes it down. During a second viewing, the tape is stopped at the points which the partner identified, and the participant renders opinions about the other's thoughts and feelings.

Trained observers then rank the similarity of each volunteer's reported thoughts and feelings to the partner's determinations about them on a three-point scale: essentially different content, similar but not the same, or essentially the same. The raters, usually three or four per study, typically agree on nearly 9 out of 10 of their rankings for the same item.

A computer software program then calculates a score denoting each volunteer's average empathic accuracy during the experimental session.

The strength of this method is that it tracks "the natural stream of consciousness during social interactions," remarks Daniel M. Wegner, a psychologist at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. Still, he contends, Ickes' approach needs to be complemented by more structured studies. For instance, researchers might examine whether conscious attempts to empathize with someone who is personally disliked typically fail, perhaps because thoughts gravitate toward that individual's repellent qualities and away from more immediate cues to what's on his or her mind.

Ickes' experimental design holds much potential for exploring empathic terrain

in social relationships, asserts Jeffrey A. Simpson, a psychologist at Texas A&M University in College Station. Its major drawback: Data collection and analysis consume huge chunks of time and labor, points out Simpson, who has collaborated with Ickes on one study. The 2 to 3 years of effort required to complete a single empathic accuracy study may discourage independent follow-ups, he maintains.

Nonetheless, findings so far provide provocative clues to how empathy operates (SN: 10/29/94, p. 280).

**I**n dating couples, for instance, insecure partners who encounter a situation that threatens to undermine or destroy the relationship find themselves at a loss for empathic insight, Ickes and his coworkers report in the October 1995 JOURNAL OF PERSONALITY AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY.

The researchers refer to this phenomenon as "motivated inaccuracy." It may represent the recruitment of one or more psychological defense mechanisms, such as denial and repression, into a largely unconscious effort to stave off unpleasant, relationship-busting truths, Ickes holds.

To put it another way, love may not always be blind, but it puts on a blindfold when necessary.

In the study, 82 couples made empathic judgments after one partner had looked at pictures of either physically attractive or unattractive dating prospects in the presence of the other.

Empathy plummeted only in a portion of the group of individuals whose partner had been shown attractive date seekers. Within that group, the drop in empathy occurred among those who, on a questionnaire, cited intense emotional dependency on their partner and insecurity about the relationship. Motivated inaccuracy probably emerges most often in couples who avoid open conflict and rely on benevolent misconceptions about one another to maintain their relationship, Ickes holds.

Of course, empathic expertise does not guarantee romantic bliss. Some couples may wield empathic intuitions like emotional daggers, torturing themselves and their partners with disturbing truths, he adds. George and Martha, the sparring spouses at the center of Edward Albee's play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, vividly illustrate the sadistic uses of empathic accuracy.

**I**n a second study, published in the October 1995 JOURNAL OF PERSONALITY AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY, 40 male and 40 female college students watched videotapes of three women discussing personal problems of their own choosing with a professional psychotherapist. After the 30-minute sessions, each of the three clients reviewed her taped encounter

and listed her thoughts and feelings at various points.

The students' empathic readings of the women started out rather poorly but improved markedly after 15 to 20 minutes of observing the videos. The largest gains occurred for students who were given immediate feedback by a researcher about whether their empathic attempts were on target.

Some students made far more accurate empathic judgments than others, Ickes says. Moreover, the thoughts and feelings of two clients proved relatively easy to read, whereas the third evoked numerous empathic flubs from all observers.

The feedback strategy employed in this study could potentially aid in the training of aspiring psychotherapists and sharpen the empathic skills of veteran clinicians, Ickes proposes. However, the Texas researcher states, many clinical psychologists he has talked with react warily to the prospect of having their empathic accuracy (or lack thereof) measured.

"If further studies find that direct feedback enhances psychotherapists' empathic accuracy with their clients, this could be a very important addition to clinical training," remarks Larry E. Beutler, a clinical psychologist at the University of California, Santa Barbara and editor of the JOURNAL OF CONSULTING AND CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY.

**E**mpathic accuracy research also brings a new perspective to reports that women home in on others' thoughts and feelings much better than men do. Such investigations have focused on narrowly defined laboratory tests, such as the ability of observers to experience an emotion portrayed in a picture or story or to report the meaning of facial expressions and body language.

Results of these studies reflect either an inherent empathic advantage for women or cultural pressures for women to monitor others' feelings and for men to ignore them, in Ickes' opinion.

Empathic accuracy findings support the latter explanation. "If men appear at times to be socially insensitive, it may have more to do with the image they wish to convey than with the [empathic] ability they possess," Ickes contends.

For instance, in a study slated to appear in the JOURNAL OF SOCIAL AND PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS, Ickes and Texas coworker Melanie Hancock find that male and female college students allowed to eavesdrop on a conversation between one of their friends and a stranger do equally well at discerning the friend's thoughts and feelings.

Husbands and wives also show about the same level of empathic accuracy regarding one another, both as newlyweds and after about 1 year of marriage, according to an investigation directed by Victor Bissonnette, a psychologist at

Southeastern Louisiana University in Hammond. His investigation will appear in *Empathic Accuracy* (New York, Guilford Press), a book edited by Ickes.

To explain women's pre-eminence on the previous laboratory tests, Ickes and Texas' Tiffany M. Graham argue in the same book that women may have evolved a slight advantage in deciphering nonverbal emotional cues, given long-standing pressures for them to care for infants (who cannot speak) and identify reliable mates (distinguishing them from no-account Casanovas who may recite the same ode to commitment). This slight difference may, in turn, have fueled cultural tendencies to give women more encouragement and opportunities for developing empathic skills, they theorize.

Women may also learn a form of empathic politeness that interferes with accurate judgments, Ickes and Graham suggest. While tracking a person's intended nonverbal signals, such as happy or sad facial expressions, women may downplay unintended cues that point to a conflicting interpretation, such as a catch in the voice or the twitch of an eyelid.

**I**n work now under way, Ickes and his colleagues plan to test the theory that partners in a relationship gradually develop mutual assumptions about one another that boost empathic accuracy. Inspiration for this approach comes from the late sociologist Erving Goffman, who wrote that individuals rely on background understanding of another person, what he called a "primary framework," to organize their interpretations of that person's behavior in various situations.

Graham, for instance, plans to examine whether volunteers achieve greater empathic accuracy for two of the videotaped psychotherapy clients if they first read brief descriptions of each woman's experiences and central conflicts. The passages serve as simulated frameworks for making decisions about what the women think and feel during therapy, she suggests.

Another novel research twist, launched by Joli Kelleher at Texas, consists of examining whether individuals who have a hidden agenda in dealing with another person receive an empathic lift. The agenda may cause them to focus more intently on cues to a partner's thoughts and feelings, Kelleher suggests. In her current experiment, one of two people conversing for the first time has been privately instructed before the meeting to try to make the other person laugh.

For now, it seems safe to say that an ample reserve of empathic understanding generally serves relationships well, even if too much of it backfires at times, Ickes says.

It may also be safe to say that voyeurism, whatever its reputation elsewhere, has a future in psychological science. □