An Intersubjective Perspective on Social Cognition and Aging

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This article offers an intersubjective perspective on the topic of social cognition and aging. We begin by outlining the essential differences between an intersubjective perspective and the more traditional subjectivist perspective, as developed in earlier articles by Ickes and Gonzalez (1994, 1996). We then suggest how 2 intersubjectivist approaches—Schutz's (1970) perspective on phenomenology and social relations and Wegner, Giuliano, and Hertel's (1985) perspective on cognitive interdependence—might be applied to the study of social cognition and aging. For each of these intersubjectivist approaches, we propose both general avenues for research and a number of more specific hypotheses.

Research on the psychology of aging has traditionally been guided by three approaches. Each of these approaches is defined by a different focus: on the aged as a target population, on age as an independent variable, and on aging as a set of interrelated developmental processes. The psychology of the aged concerns the everyday lives and behavior of older people. In contrast, the psychology of age is concerned with age differences on particular dependent variables. Finally, the psychology of aging is concerned with the behavioral changes that typically occur following young adulthood (Birren & Schroots, 1996; Moody, 1994). Basic principles of social psychology can and have been studied in the context of each of these three approaches.

Researchers who have attempted to study social cognition within a psychology of age context have addressed several areas of traditional social cognition research (for a review, see Blanchard-Fields & Abeles, 1996). For example, one line of research has focused on age-related differences in scripted knowledge structures and memory (Hess, 1992; Light & Anderson, 1983; Ross & Berg, 1992). Although younger and older participants do not differ in their reports of the typicality of certain scripts, they are likely to generate different actions within each script because of their different life contexts (Hess, 1992).

Another area of social cognition studied in the context of aging concerns age differences in participants’ causal attributions about event outcomes. For example, Blanchard-Fields (1994) found that when an outcome is causally ambiguous and reflects negative interpersonal content, older adults tend to make more interactive attributions than do younger adults (Blanchard-Fields, 1994). This and conceptually similar findings have led Blanchard-Fields to suggest that “attributational biases or distortions of information (attributing cause solely to either dispositional or situational factors) may reflect a youthful thinker’s tendency to construct the solution or events in a problem situation dualistically, for example as right versus wrong” (Blanchard-Fields & Abeles, 1996, p. 154).

Other areas of traditional social cognition research have also been explored within a psychology of age framework. For example, work has been conducted on (a) the different cognitive strategies used by younger and older adults (Blanchard-Fields & Camp, 1990), (b) the role of age as a moderator of the relation between cognitive appraisal and emotion (Weiner & Graham, 1989), and (c) the nature and content of stereotypes about older adults (Brewer & Lui, 1984; Heckhausen & Baltes, 1991). This research represents current trends in which aging research is linked to traditional content areas within mainstream social cognition.

As useful as this type of work has been, however, it is still largely wedded to the subjectivist view of social cognition. The subjectivist view is the one that has, from the very beginning, been associated with the standard, single-subject experimental paradigm of mainstream cognitive psychology. As applied to the study of social cognition, it is a view whose “preoccupation with social information processing” (Swann, 1984, p. 458) has cast the social perceiver in the role of “a hermit, isolated from the social environment,” and has relegated other people to the status of experimental “stimuli” or perceptual “targets” (Fiske & Taylor, 1984, p. 416).
To provide an alternative to the traditional subjectivist perspective, our goal in this article is to suggest how an intersubjective perspective might be brought to bear on the study of social cognition and aging. We should note at the outset that our treatment of this theme will necessarily be speculative and suggestive. To date, an intersubjective perspective has rarely been applied to research in mainstream social cognition, let alone to research on social cognition and aging. Moreover, many epistemological problems posed by an intersubjective perspective have only begun to be addressed, let alone to be resolved. Finally, to describe the intersubjective perspective in an economical way, it will be necessary for us to be selective, focusing on only two theoretical treatments that highlight some larger issues with which an intersubjective perspective on social cognition and aging should be concerned.

We begin by outlining the essential differences between an intersubjective perspective and the more traditional subjectivist perspective, as developed in earlier papers by Ickes and Gonzalez (1994, 1996). We then suggest how two intersubjectivist approaches—Schutz's (1970) perspective on phenomenology and social relations and Wegner, Giuliano, and Hertel's (1985) perspective on cognitive interdependence—might be applied to the study of social cognition and aging. In describing both the general avenues for research and the more specific hypotheses suggested by these two intersubjectivist approaches, we make no claim that the issues they raise or the predictions they make are unique. Nor do we attempt to compare and contrast their predictions and implications with those of more traditional, subjectivist approaches. Rather, consistent with the more modest goal of this article, we merely attempt to introduce and illustrate the heuristic value of an intersubjective perspective in a way that might encourage other writers to attempt such metatheoretical comparisons and contrasts in the future.

ON INTERSUBJECTIVE PHENOMENA AND SOCIAL COGNITION

In two recent articles, Ickes and Gonzalez (1994, 1996) attempted to make explicit a distinction that has seldom been recognized: that, historically, there have been two major paradigms for the study of social cognition. The first is a subjective paradigm that has its origins in mainstream cognitive psychology. This paradigm has been so successful as a model for research that it has dominated and virtually defined the field of social cognition throughout its history. Consistent with its epistemological assumptions, this first paradigm relies on a methodology in which participants are tested individually, in studies designed to ensure the conceptual and statistical independence of each participant's cognitions and behavior from those of the other persons tested.

In contrast, the second paradigm is an intersubjective paradigm that appears to have been invented by interpersonal relations and small groups researchers to enable the study of interaction in dyads and small groups. Relative to the first paradigm, this second paradigm is neither well known nor widely used. In fact, it has imposed so many demands and difficulties on the researcher (i.e., in methodological, practical, statistical, and theoretical terms) that it has won relatively few adherents. Ironically, it is seldom even considered as an alternative paradigm for social cognition research. Consistent with its epistemological assumptions, this second paradigm relies on a methodology in which participants are tested together, in studies designed not only to permit the interdependence of their cognitions and behavior but also to examine these patterns of interdependence as phenomena of fundamental importance to the study of social cognition.

Ickes and Gonzalez (1994, 1996) proposed that the term "social" cognition can be used as a convenient shorthand for the subjective social cognition research guided by the first paradigm we have just described. The quotation marks around the word "social" are meant to indicate that—because of the subject's independence and separation from others in these single-subject designs—the modifier "social" is of limited or even questionable applicability. In contrast, the term social cognition can be used as a convenient shorthand for the intersubjective social cognition research guided by the second paradigm we have just described. Here, the italics are meant to indicate that—because of the subject's interdependence and involvement with others in these dyadic or group designs—the modifier social is both essential and defining. In general, then, the term "social" cognition should be taken as equivalent to the seemingly paradoxical term "subjective social cognition," whereas the term social cognition should be taken as equivalent to the seemingly redundant term "intersubjective social cognition." We would argue that neither the seeming paradox nor the seeming redundancy is accidental.

Essential Differences Between the Subjective and Intersubjective Paradigms

The essential differences between the "social" cognition and the social cognition paradigms are summarized in Table 1. These points of difference, which necessarily overlap each other to some degree, are useful in making explicit the contrasting theoretical, methodological, and statistical assumptions that distinguish the two paradigms.

Contrasting Theoretical Assumptions

As the first two points of comparison in Table 1 reveal, implicit in the "social" cognition and social cognition paradigms are strikingly different theoretical views about the
nature of social cognition. The first paradigm views social cognition as the subjective reactions of a single individual to a preprogrammed "social" stimulus event. In contrast, the second paradigm views social cognition as the subjective reactions of at least two individuals to their interaction experience and as the mutual, intersubjective meaning they jointly construct through their interaction behavior. In the "social" cognition paradigm, participants are tested individually and can interact only with people (i.e., experimenters or confederates) whose behavior is constrained by an experimental script and ideally does not vary from one participant to the next within the same experimental condition. Mutual influence should, ideally, not occur.

Contrasting Methodological Assumptions

As the next two points of comparison in Table 1 reveal, the "social" cognition and social cognition paradigms also display striking differences in their respective methodologies. In the "social" cognition paradigm, participants are tested individually and can interact only with people (i.e., experimenters or confederates) whose behavior is constrained by an experimental script. In the social cognition paradigm, participants are tested together—in dyads or in larger groups—and can interact with each other in a relatively naturalistic way that allows genuine mutual influence to occur. Ideally, mutual influence should not occur in the "social" cognition paradigm; indeed, any evidence that the participant's behavior has altered the behavior of the experimenters, the confederates, or the other participants is typically regarded as a serious methodological problem or design flaw.

Contrasting Statistical Assumptions

As the third and fifth points of comparison in Table 1 reveal, the "social" cognition and social cognition paradigms reflect different statistical assumptions as well. The "social" cognition paradigm uses data-analytic models that assume that each participant's cognitive responses are statistically independent from those of other participants. If this assumption is violated, the resulting interdependence in the participants' responses is typically viewed as an undesirable statistical artifact—that is, as "nuisance variance" that the researcher must attempt to eliminate or control for in the data analyses. In contrast, the social cognition paradigm uses data-analytic models that assume that each participant's cognitive re-
sponses are statistically interdependent with those of the other participants in their dyad or group. Indeed, any empirical evidence of such interdependence is typically viewed with great interest as potential evidence of an intersubjective phenomenon.

The Paradox of Subjective Social Cognition

Given these contrasts between the "social" cognition and social cognition paradigms, the seemingly paradoxical nature of subjective social cognition should be evident. Research on subjective social cognition derives from the paradoxical assumption that the best way to study social cognition is to first remove it from the social interaction context in which it naturally occurs. Ironically, however, by attempting to study social cognition outside its natural context, researchers have severely limited the chances that any genuinely social processes can affect the participants' cognitive activities (Fiske & Goodwin, 1994; Levine, Resnick, & Higgins, 1993). In addition, they have virtually eliminated the possibility of studying those intersubjective phenomena that various writers have argued are the ones that make social cognition a unique and distinctive field of research.

Subjective social cognition is the product of imagined, rather than real, interaction. It occurs entirely in one person's head, rather than in the intersubjective space created when two people jointly construct a mutual meaning context through their conversation and nonverbal behavior (Hancock & Ickes, 1996; Schutz, 1970). Metaphorically, it is like the sound of one hand clapping, or like the actor who soliloquizes about relations with characters unseen. On the one hand, it is a genuine aspect of social cognition, reflecting the theoretically important process by which we represent to ourselves the imagined thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of other people. On the other hand, it is not the only aspect of social cognition, or even the most important one, because it fails to acknowledge—and therefore fails to address—the even more important process by which two or more minds attempt—and often fail—to meet. Paradoxically, however, it is the aspect of social cognition that has dominated researchers' attention for over 50 years.

We suggest that trying to understand social cognition by studying only its subjective aspects (and simultaneously ignoring its intersubjective aspects) is a bit like practicing swimming on dry land. The swimming, kicking, and breathing motions that one learns to make while practicing swimming on dry land are important—even essential—components of the process of swimming. Yet in themselves, they do not confront the would-be swimmer with such crucial aspects of the actual swimming experience as the surface tension of the water, its pressure and drag beneath the surface, and its propensity to flow into any bodily orifices within an instant. Analogously, the study of subjective social cognition provides important—even essential—insights about the processes of social cognition as they occur inside one person's head. However, it does not and cannot inform us about those intersubjective aspects of social cognition that affect the social perceiver just as surely as the surface tension, density, and fluidity of the water affect the swimmer.

The message here should be clear: In its natural form, social cognition occurs in a social environment just as swimming occurs in an aquatic environment. Just as one would never confuse swimming on dry land with the complete, immersive experience of swimming, so one should never confuse the purely subjective aspect of "social" cognition with the complete, immersive experience of social cognition in a genuinely intersubjective context.

AN INTERSUBJECTIVE PERSPECTIVE ON SOCIAL COGNITION AND AGING

Just as there are different theoretical perspectives within the subjective paradigm that could be applied to the topic of social cognition and aging, so there are different theoretical perspectives within the intersubjective paradigm that could be applied to this topic. In this article, we consider two such perspectives—Schutz's (1970) perspective on phenomenology and social relations and Wegner et al.'s (1985) perspective on cognitive interdependence. The first perspective will be discussed at some length; the second will be discussed in a more cursory way.

For several reasons, these two perspectives are appropriate choices for introducing readers to the intersubjective view of social cognition and illustrating its specific relevance to the study of aging. Schutz's (1970) phenomenological view is one of the few to deal explicitly with intersubjectivity as a transgenerational basis of social reality that is subject to both cultural and temporal evolution. In addition, Schutz introduces Husserlian ideas about the nature of human consciousness and memory that appear to have relatively unique implications for the study of social cognition and aging. Complementing Schutz's phenomenological perspective, Wegner et al.'s (1985) cognitive interdependence model neatly illustrates how an intersubjective view of social cognition is grounded in, and yet transcends, a purely subjective one. By suggesting how various human information-processing functions are not only distributed among but transactively deployed by the members of dyads and larger social groups, Wegner et al.'s model provides both an essential link to mainstream cognitive psychology and a theoretical basis for understanding why the disruption of intersubjective memory systems can be so debilitating for elderly individuals.

Schutz's Perspective on Phenomenology and Social Relations

The most cogent statement of Schutz's theoretical perspective can be found in a book of his edited writings titled On Phenomenology and Social Relations (Schutz, 1970). Be-
cause many psychologists are not familiar with Schutz’s work, it is important that we provide a bit of historical background along with a very general outline of Schutz’s approach.

**Theoretical overview.** As Helmut Wagner noted in his excellent introduction to *On Phenomenology and Social Relations*, “As a thinker, Schutz was possessed by a single purpose, that of laying the foundations of a phenomenological sociology” (Schutz, 1970, p. 3). To accomplish this goal, Schutz sought to integrate Husserl’s insights about phenomenology with Weber’s insights about sociology. The result of this marriage of Husserl’s phenomenology and Weber’s sociology was a highly ambitious and broad-scale theoretical perspective that gave primary emphasis to the cognitive aspect of social life, but was just as concerned with intersubjective phenomena as with subjective ones.

It is impossible to do justice to Schutz’s (1970) approach in these few pages. However, the following 10 points may be useful in at least suggesting its general outline:

1. We are born into an intersubjective world of “social reality,” a world that was established before we were born and that will continue after we die. From our birth until our death, we are as fully immersed in this intersubjective world of social reality as a fish is immersed in its aquatic environment.

2. Sociological terms such as *culture*, *subculture*, and *family* make reference—each at a different level—to the particular character of the intersubjective world that each of us grows up in. A set of preexisting typifications, roughly equivalent to the schemas of cognitive psychologists, are embodied in language and social conventions at each of these levels. Collectively, these typifications provide a “stock of knowledge” that new members of the family, subculture, or culture can acquire and use to represent social reality to themselves and to express their view of it to others. However, because the set of typifications available at one level (e.g., the family) only partially and incompletely overlaps the set of typifications available at another level (e.g., the culture), the set of typifications that constitute each individual’s view of social reality will substantially overlap, but never be identical to, the sets possessed by others.

3. These differences in the stock of knowledge available to the individual members of a society are particularly evident when comparisons are made across different occupations. Because of the need for different kinds of work to be distributed within a society, typifications that are specific to certain occupations also evolve, and are embodied in language terms and social conventions that are more or less unique to those occupational domains. In contrast to cultural knowledge, which is widely available and which strangers within the culture can readily assume each other to possess (at least in the probabilistic sense of a high degree of overlap), such occupational knowledge is not widely available and is generally not assumed unless it is known that the stranger is—or was—also a member of one’s own occupation.

4. The sets of typifications available at all levels of society (family, occupation, subculture, culture) are open rather than closed. Although some typifications persist over long periods of time, others do not. The more transient ones may be modified, either gradually or more abruptly, or they may simply be replaced as more useful ones are developed that better reflect the aspect of social reality that the original ones were designed to “capture.” An important implication of this process is that our ability to understand both earlier generations (our predecessors) and subsequent generations (our successors) may be limited. Specifically, to the extent that earlier and later generations express their experience in terms of a subset of typifications that is common to all cultures and relatively invariant across time, their experience should be relatively easy for us to understand. However, to the extent that they express their experience in terms of a subset of typifications that is peculiar to their time and culture, their experience should be relatively difficult to understand.

5. Individuals whose lives have extended over several decades are likely to have acquired, and to have repeatedly relied on, a subset of typifications that may no longer be current within their contemporary culture. To the extent that these individuals have not updated their personal set of typifications to maximize its overlap with that of the contemporary culture, their ability to communicate with people from subsequent generations may be impaired.

6. Although we are born into an intersubjective world of social, as well as physical, reality, we each encounter this world through our own subjectivity. According to Husserl, our conscious experience always has an object. Consciousness is never empty (i.e., consciousness of nothing), but is always filled with some content. However, the objects of our perception are seldom perceived in their completeness, but instead are apperceived. (For example, we perceive the side of the red, ripe, juicy apple that is turned toward us and mentally “fill in” or apperceive the unseen side, which we assume also to be red and free of wormholes.) Similarly, our perception of other people is nearly always an apperception in which their unseen attributes (including their motives, traits, and more transient thoughts and feelings) are mentally “filled in” in a manner that is phenomenally as spontaneous as our apperception of the unseen aspects of inanimate objects such as the apple.

7. According to Husserl, the subjective experience of “living in our acts” or “living in the stream of consciousness” is assumed to be phenomenally quite different from the subjective experience of “reflecting on our acts” or “turning back against the stream of consciousness.” When we merely “live in” our experience and do not reflect on it, it is presumably more difficult for us to impose a cognitive structure and organization on this experience. In this state of unreflect-
ed-on experiencing, our sensations, perceptions, thoughts, feelings, wants, and desires are not isolated or grasped individually, but instead seem to constitute a single, relatively undifferentiated flow. To the extent that we stay in this unreflective state, our subsequent memory for the events that transpired while we were in it is likely to be impaired. However, to the extent that we interrupt the flow of our lived-in experience by turning back against the stream of consciousness and reflecting on it, our subsequent memory for the events that transpired is likely to be enhanced.

8. According to Husserl, as elaborated by Schutz, we are more likely to reflect on our lived experience to the extent that our actions are based on a previously projected plan. Plans involve an imagined outcome and a series of concatenated actions that the actor believes may be sufficient to produce that outcome. Because plans often do not work as well in practice as they do in theory, actors must, while enacting them, periodically reflect on whether the current action is appropriate to the overall plan and consistent with achieving its final objective. Thus, enacting planned action requires the kind of repeated reflection on one’s own stream of consciousness that Husserl argued was necessary for enhancing one’s later recollection of it. Husserl also offered an important caveat, however. He believed that once the plan had been effected and the goal achieved, the component actions that led to the goal tend to become blurred and confounded in the actor’s memory, so that the resulting memory is a more streamlined and integrated summary of the plan-to-goal sequence.

9. Our plans at any given moment reflect the psychological situations that currently dominate our individual lifespaces. Our plans are influenced by our biographical histories as well as by our external circumstances. For this reason, it is misleading to speak of putting two people in the same situation, because their differing biographical histories will lead them to experience the situation in different ways. Sometimes these differences will be trivial, and other times they will be profound, but such individual differences will always exist.

10. The presumption of other people’s subjectivity is always made when we interact with them. We further presume that both their unique biographical history and their current perspective will lead them to see at least some aspects of the current situation differently than we do. Through our conversations with others, we attempt to understand their interpretive frames, or “meaning contexts,” so that we can compare and contrast them with our own. More important, we attempt through our conversations to develop intersubjective meaning contexts with others that will facilitate an even greater level of mutual understanding.

As an attempted synthesis of ideas drawn from phenomenology and sociology, Schutz’s (1970) perspective was not developed with the research psychologist in mind. Although Schutz was very careful in his conceptual definitions, he felt no need to provide operational definitions to accompany them. We are personally less troubled by this fact than many of our colleagues might be. In our view, interesting ideas are worth considering no matter where they come from, and it is up to whomever finds them interesting to figure out what to do with them next. So, without worrying too much at this point about operational definitions, let us briefly suggest a few potential implications of Schutz’s approach for the study of social cognition and aging.

Some potential research implications. Consistent with its dual emphasis on the subjective and intersubjective aspects of social life, Schutz’s (1970) approach appears to have implications for both the subjective and the intersubjective aspects of social cognition and aging.

Regarding the subjective aspects of social cognition and aging, consider the notion that memory for our own experience is impaired to the extent that we simply live in our stream of consciousness without reflecting on it (see point 7). A possible implication of this notion is that when individuals near the end of their lives, their most vivid and compelling memories might concern those past events on which they have reflected most often. Vivid and compelling is not the same thing as detailed and accurate, however. Because completed plan-to-goal sequences may be viewed on reflection in a more streamlined and unified way (point 8), the accuracy and detail of the memory may not match its vividness and availability. Hence, the most vivid and compelling memories of elderly persons may be ones in which the general theme and import of the events are preserved but many details are either forgotten or have been cognitively reworked to better conform to the more streamlined story of what happened and how, in retrospect, it has been reevaluated and interpreted.

In contrast to such frequently reviewed past events, current events in the life of an elderly person may be less vivid and compelling in memory (Winograd, 1993) for at least two reasons. The first reason is that current events have transpired so recently that there simply has not been as much time—and therefore opportunity—for the person to reflect on them repeatedly. Having years, or even decades, to reflect repeatedly on an event should enhance its chances of being remembered well, in comparison to having only hours, days, or weeks to do so. The second reason is that when older people retire from their occupations, their daily lives can in many cases involve the enactment of fewer planned projects of the type that require extensive monitoring and modification in the face of new and unforeseen contingencies (Harris & Cole, 1980). For at least some individuals, such projects may be replaced in the retirement years by simpler and more repetitive (i.e., highly overlearned) tasks and activities that require little or no monitoring and that present few, if any, new and unforeseen contingencies. If certain elderly people spend most of their time simply living in such simple, highly routinized acts rather than actively monitoring, reflecting on,
and contingently modifying actions whose outcomes are much less predictable and certain, their memory for these "mindless" (repetitive and routinized) experiences should be impaired (see point 7).

A fascinating implication of this line of reasoning is that impaired memory during old age may—in some cases, at least—be attributable more to the lack of reflection on one's daily activities than to an organic loss of function (assuming, of course, that both influences can co-occur). If so, the first of these influences could also shed light on why old age is regarded as a kind of "second childhood" for some—although certainly not all—individuals. If the conscious life of some older adults comes to resemble the conscious life of young children who pursue relatively few planned projects and spend most of their day simply living in their experiences without feeling much need to reflect on them, the similarity between early childhood and old age can be seen as a similarity in the mode of consciousness that is dominant at these stages of the life span. The plausibility of this implication is suggested by the findings of Puckett and his colleagues (Puckett & Reese, 1993; Puckett, Torres, Dugosh, & Alaniz, 1995) in their work on everyday cognition and working memory in older adults. They have reported that the working memory of older adults is more constrained than that of younger adults when they are asked to perform an "everyday task" as opposed to a more abstract, academic "laboratory task" (Puckett et al., 1995).

If the nonorganic memory impairment of at least some older adults is indeed attributable to their lack of reflection on highly routinized actions, then improving their memory might be as simple as (a) providing them with more incentives and opportunities to reflect on their current experience, or (b) challenging them to take on projects that require a greater level of conscious monitoring, reflection, and adjustment in the face of changing situational contingencies. Providing elderly individuals with opportunities to reflect on their current experience might be as simple as making daily phone calls to ask about the major events of their day—what experiences they had and how they felt about them. Also, challenging older people to take on "mindful" (as opposed to mindless) projects need not require such demanding endeavors as writing the great American novel or attempting to win a Nobel Prize. There are many less demanding activities available (e.g., woodworking, sketching and painting, gardening, volunteer work) that also require the kind of planning, monitoring, and modification that distinguish reflected-on actions from those that are merely lived in.

The phenomenological emptiness of lives that lack such activities is suggested by one senior citizen's comment that "There is nothing that will hurt an elderly person as much as just sitting alone all day, doing nothing, thinking about nothing" (cited by Ekerdt, 1986, p. 241). Avoiding that sense of emptiness may require more than a token commitment to what Ekerdt described as "the busy ethic"—an ethic that legitimates the greater leisure of the postretirement years when it is "earnest, occupied, and filled with activity" (p. 239). Consistent with the implicit moral demands of this ethic, global feelings of satisfaction in retirement have been related not only to the sheer number of activities reported (Hooker & Ventis, 1984; Larson, 1978; O'Brien, 1981), but also to the need to perceive these activities as being genuinely useful (Hooker & Ventis, 1984).

Beyond its implications for our understanding of the subjective aspects of the elderly person's experience, Schutz's (1970) approach may also have important implications for our understanding of the intersubjective aspects of social cognition and aging. As point 5 suggests, individuals whose lives have extended over several decades are likely to have acquired, and to have repeatedly relied on, a subset of typifications that may no longer be current within their contemporary culture. To the extent that these individuals have not updated their personal set of typifications to maximize its overlap with that of the contemporary culture, their ability to communicate with people from subsequent generations may be impaired (see Hummert, Wiemann, & Nussbaum, 1994).

This problem might be especially acute for older adults who are forced to live outside mainstream society, with little or no exposure to people from younger generations from whom they can learn to update their typifications. Residents of nursing homes might provide the prototypic example of individuals in this category (Moody, 1994). The same problem might be evident in a somewhat different form for older people whose occupational category (e.g., blacksmith, Linotype operator) no longer exists in contemporary society, because the specialized typifications associated with that occupation cannot be readily and widely shared with others. In either case, however, to the degree that their sets of typifications fail to overlap those of contemporary society, elderly individuals may find it difficult to effectively communicate with, understand, and be understood by individuals from subsequent generations. They may feel cognitively isolated from mainstream society—"marooned" in a social reality that no longer exists.

This fate may be avoidable, however, if older people are involved in activities that can help them update their store of typifications and thereby strengthen their cognitive links with subsequent generations. Adult education activities (e.g., undertaking a course of self-study in some area, attending classes at a local college or university, joining a special interest group in the community, or in an Internet chat room) provide the most obvious examples of ways that older people can update their own store of typifications (Harris & Cole, 1980). Mentoring activities (e.g., training an adult child to take over the family business, helping raise a grandchild, or tutoring an illiterate adolescent) may be of even greater value, however, because they often provide more opportunities for the older person to impart knowledge as well as to receive it. By facilitating the two-way exchange of generational typifications, mentoring...
activities have the potential to benefit both the older mentor and the younger mentee, enriching the life experience and sense of historical continuity for both individuals (Nussbaum, Thompson, & Robinson, 1989).

Wegner et al.'s (1985) Perspective on Cognitive Interdependence

If elderly people allow their intersubjective world to shrink by failing to take advantage of opportunities to update their knowledge through contacts with younger people, they run the risk of becoming overly dependent on the smaller circle of elderly friends and relations with whom they feel that they can still communicate effectively. Because the sets of typifications that define the social reality of elderly individuals are likely to display the greatest overlap with those of other elderly individuals, people in this cohort will naturally gravitate to each other for mutual understanding and support. In doing so, however, they can experience other vulnerabilities that are only touched on in Schutz's (1970) account but are examined in some detail in Wegner et al.'s (1985) perspective on cognitive interdependence.

Theoretical overview. Motivated by a desire to save what was good and discard what was bad in the conception of the "group mind," Wegner et al. (1985) proposed a theory of cognitive interdependence in which individuals develop intersubjective memory systems to complement—and compensate for the limitations of—their own subjective memories. A simple example is provided by a married couple in which the wife is the family financial expert and the husband is the family genealogist. When the wife wants to know to whom Aunt Sarah is married, it is not essential for that particular item of information to be stored in her own individual memory—she can simply, by asking him, access her husband’s memory, because he is the expert on such matters. Similarly, when the husband wants to know if they have any overdue bills this month, he can tap his wife’s memory, which thus becomes an extension of his own.

Just as different items of information on a computer’s hard drive are stored in different locations and retrieved from those locations as needed, so in this intersubjective memory system do the partners store different items of information in different locations (i.e., in their respective individual memories) and retrieve them as needed. This retrieval is direct in the case when one accesses one’s own memory and is indirect in the case when one accesses one’s partner’s memory. In functional terms, however, the processes involved are essentially the same (see Wegner et al., 1983, who also considered some exceptions). Moreover, intersubjective memory systems can be extended to become as large as one might imagine, with the Internet providing the prototypic example at this extreme.

Some potential research implications. To simplify their theoretical exposition, Wegner et al. (1985) focused primarily on the intersubjective memory system of a married or cohabiting couple, and discussed both the advantages and the vulnerabilities inherent in such a system. Their ideas, especially when viewed within the frame of reference provided by Schutz's (1970) approach, provide a number of interesting implications for the study of social cognition and aging.

First, elderly persons should be able to avoid the social isolation and estrangement of feeling marooned in a social reality that no longer exists by becoming and remaining actively involved in social networks that include younger people and by staying current with contemporary culture through their reading and through their viewing of television, films, and so on. The types of adult education activities and mentoring activities that we cited earlier may be of even greater value in this regard, because they can strengthen older people’s sense of connectedness in social, as well as more strictly cognitive, ways.

Second, in cases in which the strategies described earlier cannot be readily applied (e.g., an elderly couple living in relative isolation in a rural setting), elderly persons should be buffered from feeling isolated and marooned in a social reality that no longer exists to the extent that they find this reality sustained and validated in their close relationships with one or more people from their own cohort (e.g., their spouse).

Third, elderly persons should also be buffered from the negative consequences of lapses or impairments in their own individual memories (for whatever reasons) to the extent that they can rely on the intersubjective memory systems in their social support networks to take up the slack.

Fourth, the intersubjective memory systems of elderly persons should be particularly vulnerable to the death of elderly intimates who take both their store of memories and their ability to validate the survivor’s experience with them when they die (Harris & Cole, 1980; Lofland, 1982). This vulnerability should be greatest in the case when an elderly couple has lived most of their lives together in relative isolation from others. As Wegner et al. (1985) noted, the death of a spouse in such a case is also the death of an intersubjective memory system on which the surviving spouse has, over decades, become highly dependent. The sudden realization of that dependency and loss may contribute greatly to the survivor’s emotional devastation and feeling of being disconnected from the world (see also Lofland, 1982).

Fifth, because the impending disruption of intersubjective memory systems can in many cases be anticipated (e.g., in cases of an organic loss of memory due to Alzheimer’s disease or in cases of a slow-progressing but life-threatening illness), proactive steps can be taken to minimize the harmful effects of such a disruption. Wills can be written or revised, family and financial records can be compiled and placed in safe custody, bank accounts can be closed and consolidated, and so on. Sometimes, minimizing disruption of the intersubjective memory system may even involve deliberate
Attempts to ensure that matters kept secret remain that way. Records of previous marriages or miscarriages might be deliberately destroyed, certain letters and photographs might be burned, and provisions for the welfare of an illegitimate son or daughter might be effected within the confines of attorney-client privilege. Through such means, even the benign illusions that sustain many intersubjective memory systems can be preserved against an otherwise irredeemable loss.

**Applying an Intersubjective Perspective to Research on Aging**

Theorizing about intersubjective phenomena is one thing; studying them empirically is another. What methodological resources are available to researchers who would like to apply an intersubjective perspective to their research—whether it concerns aging or some other aspect of social cognition?

Over the past 2 decades, considerable methodological progress has been made on two highly interrelated fronts. First, substantial progress has been made in the development of new procedural models (i.e., research paradigms) suited to the study of intersubjective phenomena. These procedural models include, but are not limited to, (a) the unstructured dyadic interaction paradigm developed by Ickes and his colleagues (Ickes, Robertson, Tooke, & Teng, 1986; Ickes, Stinson, Bissonnette, & Garcia, 1990; Ickes & Tooke, 1988); (b) the empathic accuracy paradigms developed by the same group of researchers (Ickes, Bissonnette, Garcia, & Stinson, 1990; Ickes & Tooke, 1988); and (c) the Social Relations Model paradigms developed by Kenny and his colleagues (Kenny, 1988, 1994; Kenny & Albright, 1987; Malloy & Kenny, 1986).

Second, substantial progress has been made in the development of new statistical models designed to deal appropriately with the interdependence in the responses of dyad or group members (e.g., Gonzalez & Griffin, 1997; Kenny, 1988, 1994; Kenny, Hallmark, Sullivan, & Kashy, 1993; Kenny & La Voie, 1985; Kraemer & Jacklin, 1979; Mendoza & Graziano, 1982). These “statistics of interdependence” enable researchers to model both the independent and interdependent cognitive processes of research participants who are studied as the members of dyads or larger groups (Gonzalez & Griffin, 1997).

Through the use of these new research paradigms and statistical procedures, researchers can now explore a range of intersubjective phenomena that were rarely, if ever, addressed in the past. These phenomena include dyadic intersubjectivity (Ickes et al., 1988), metaperspective taking (Fletcher & Fitness, 1990; Frable, Blackstone, & Scherbaum, 1990; Ickes et al., 1986), and empathic accuracy (Ickes, 1993, 1997; Ickes, Stinson, et al., 1990; Marangoni et al., 1995; Stinson & Ickes, 1992). They also include consensus and meta-accuracy in person perception (Kenny, 1994; Kenny & Albright, 1987; Malloy & Albright, 1990), and “coorientation” and “shared meaning” effects (Chaplin & Panter, 1993; Kenny & Kashy, 1994).

If researchers have lacked the methodological tools to address intersubjective phenomena in the past, they are increasingly well-equipped to address such phenomena in present and future research. Researchers who wish to apply an intersubjective perspective to the study of social cognition and aging will, of course, have to invest the time required to learn to use these methodological tools. We would argue, however, that this investment is a small one in light of the potential rewards.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the study of social cognition and aging can benefit from the insights of theorists who have developed an intersubjective view of social cognition. In this article, this conclusion was supported by deriving specific hypotheses about social cognition and aging from two rather different theoretical approaches—Schutz’s (1970) perspective on phenomenology and social relations and Wegner et al.’s (1985) perspective on cognitive interdependence. The heuristic value of intersubjective approaches to social cognition and aging should be evident from these hypotheses, even if certain of them could have been derived from other theoretical approaches as well. Future writers are encouraged to make such theoretical comparisons and contrasts explicit in ways that will help to determine both the unique advantages and the unique limitations of an intersubjective approach.

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