INTRODUCTION

Are there age differences in higher-order social cognition tasks, such as judging socially inappropriate behavior? The literature on age differences on such theory of mind (TOM) skills is mixed (Happé et al., 1998; MacPherson et al., 2002; Mayor et al., 2002; Sullivan & Ruffman, 2004). One study reported young adults were better than older adults at discriminating between clips of social gaffes versus control clips from the British situation-comedy The Office (Halterstadt et al., 2011). It is important to test whether these age differences were specific to this situation-comedy series or if they extend to situations that better match older adults’ humor styles. Work on impression formation and social attributions suggests that increasing the relevance of the character often reduces age differences in social judgments (Blanchard-Fields & Beatty, 2001; Hess, Rosenberg, & Waters, 2001).

We tested whether age differences are present in a more diverse set of situation-comedy clips and examined how these social situations were perceived. Based on pilot data, we selected 14 clips (7 depicting inappropriate social behavior and 7 control clips depicting appropriate social behavior) that were relevant to both young and older adults. We also examined whether differences in humor style were related to differences in judgments of behavior.

HYPOTHESES

1. There will be no age difference in the ability to discriminate between socially appropriate and inappropriate behavior.
2. Older adults will find the comedy clips less funny than young adults.
3. Older adults will report less aggressive humor styles than young adults.
4. Social appropriateness judgments will be associated with individual differences in humor style.

METHOD

Participants

n = 30 Young Adults (70% female; 17-21 years)
9 = 29 Older Adults (66% female; 64-84 years)

Design

Between-Subjects = 2 Age Groups: Young, Old
Within-Subjects = 2 Clip Types: Inappropriate Behavior, Appropriate Behavior

Materials

Pilot Study: 17 young adults, 10 older adults
12 clips depicting inappropriate behavior
3 clips depicting appropriate behavior
Participants rated the behavior of the main character:
0 = not at all socially appropriate; 100% = entirely socially appropriate
7 control clips rated > 50% by both YA & OA selected for main study
7 control clips rated > 50% by both YA & OA selected for main study

RESULTS

1. No Age Differences in Discriminating Behavior

METHOD (continued)

Materials (continued)

Humor Styles Questionnaire (Martin et al., 2003)
32 items assess four dimensions of humor using a Likert-type scale (1 = totally disagree; 7 = totally agree)

When telling jokes or saying funny things, I am usually not very concerned about how other people are taking it.
I do not like it when people use humor as a way of criticizing or putting someone down (reverse keyed).

Affiliative Humor: tendency to share humor with others, tell jokes and funny stories, amuse others, make others laugh, enjoy laughing along with others (a = .76)

Self-Enhancing Humor: tendency to maintain a humorous outlook on life even when not with others, use humor in coping with stress, cheer oneself up with humor (a = .63)

Aggressive Humor: tendency to use humor to derogate, put down, or manipulate others; use of ridicule, offensive humor; compulsive expression of humor even when inappropriate (a = .63)

Self-Defeating Humor: tendency to amuse others at one’s own expense, self-deprecating humor; laughing along with others when being ridiculed or put down; using humor to hide one’s true feelings from self and others (a = .84)

Procedure

For each of the 14 clips, participants:
Rated social appropriateness of main character’s behavior
0 = not at all socially appropriate; 100% = entirely socially appropriate
Rated funniness of clip
0 = not at all funny; 100% = extremely funny

Presentation order of clips counterbalanced across participants.

RESULTS (continued)

2. YAs Rate Inappropriate Clips Funnier than OAs

2. YA Rate Inappropriate Clips Funnier than OAs

MAIN EFFECTS

Figure 2.

• YAs rated the clips as funnier than OAs
• Inappropriate clips were rated as funnier than appropriate clips
• T-tests confirmed no age differences in funniness for control clips, but YAs (M = 50.87, SD = 2.57) rated inappropriate clips as funnier than OAs (M = 50.71, SD = 2.49); t(60) = 4.53, p < .001, d = 1.25

3. Aggressive Humor Style: YAs > OAs

3. Higher Appropriateness Associated with Higher Ratings of Appropriateness for Inappropriate Clips

CONCLUSIONS

We found no evidence that older adults were impaired at discriminating between appropriate and inappropriate behavior. Whether age differences are found in TOM tasks may depend on the age-relevance of the behavior. In the Halberstadt et al. (2011) study, age differences were driven by the control clips: older adults judged control clips from The Office as less appropriate than young adults. In our study, young and older adults judged the diverse set of control clips equally appropriate.

Older adults rated the inappropriate clips as less funny than young. Older adults were also less likely to endorse an aggressive humor style than young adults. Thus, older adults may be less likely to enjoy humor at the expense of others, which is often the type of humor featured in situation comedies. Rather than interpreting age differences as a “social deficit” for older adults, and thus assuming young adults are making the “correct” judgment, researchers should consider whether judging control clips as slightly less appropriate than young adults or judging extremely inappropriate social behavior as less funny than young adults truly represent maladaptive judgments.