

# Individual differences in the accuracy of detecting social covariations: Ecological sensitivity <sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

Ecological sensitivity refers to the ability to detect covariations in the social environment. The goal of this research was to investigate one operational definition of ecological sensitivity, the ability to observe covariations occurring between group membership and particular behaviors exhibited by group members. A 15-excerpt videotape was devised in which such covariations were scripted into the behavior of the people who were interacting. After watching each excerpt, participants were asked to describe up to three behavioral differences they observed between two groups identified on the answer sheet. Higher ecological sensitivity consisted of recalling a larger number of valid covariations. In three studies, with a total of 279 participants, higher ecological sensitivity was associated with (1) being female, (2) another ecological sensitivity task (accuracy of one's beliefs about the nature of psychological gender differences), (3) more self-reported attunement to social interaction, (4) greater tolerance for ambiguity and openness to experience, (5) more extraversion, and (6) better psychological adjustment. There was no overall association with several measures of general cognitive ability, cognitive style, and ability to decode nonverbal cues.

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## 1. Introduction

“Why is it you rush the net only after dark?” This is what Neil asks Brenda in Philip Roth’s novel *Goodbye, Columbus*, after watching her play tennis as the day fades into twilight and then darkness (Roth, 1959, p. 13). Impressed by his acuity, Brenda replies, “You noticed?” and soon invites Neil to kiss her. Though Neil’s accurate observation is probably not entirely responsible for the love affair that fills the rest of the novel, nevertheless Brenda was pleased that he was carefully observing not only her behavior, but the contingencies surrounding her behavior as well. In the present research, we undertook a first investigation of the skill that Neil displayed in this scene.<sup>1</sup>

Over the last several decades, researchers have investigated correlates of accurate social perception, specifically the ability to observe and interpret individuals’ behaviors indicative of emotional states, personal characteristics, and interpersonal qualities such as kinship and interpersonal relationships (Hall & Bernieri, 2001). If “perception is for doing,” as Gibson proposed (McArthur & Baron, 1983), then certainly one of the many things that perception allows us to do is accurately observe and interpret qualities of, and cues within, our social environment. Among other things, perception may allow us to discern how the behaviors and/or qualities of certain individuals distinguish them as members of a social group.

In general, but especially when entering a novel situation, the ability accurately to identify the members of particular groups is a very important skill to have (Allport & Kramer, 1946; Andrzejewski, Hall, & Salib, in preparation). By accurately observing how individuals or groups differ from one another in their behaviors and/or appearance—in other words, by being aware of social covariations—a perceiver may be able to negotiate the complexities of social life more successfully. In the present research, we explored the ability to notice and recall covariations between group membership and behavior, as a reflection of *ecological sensitivity*. We developed a method for measuring ecological sensitivity and we assessed an array of correlates.

### 1.1. Defining ecological sensitivity

Ecological sensitivity can be broadly defined as the ability to perceive and interpret accurately how individuals, groups, and the environments they occupy interact with and influence one another. It is conceivable that different individuals might have varying degrees of ecological sensitivity for these different types of covariation relationships. Table 1 provides a limited selection of the types of covariations that an ecologically sensitive individual might be accurate at identifying. As this table suggests, there are many such types of covariation relationships. Previous authors have taken steps to establish a normative model for how covariation judgments are made (Crocker, 1981) and have noted that there are individual differences in how covariation information is processed (Shaklee, 1983). McArthur and Baron (1983) specifically stated that accurately perceiving covariation information within social contexts should be adaptive. Ecological sensitivity would

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<sup>1</sup> The answer to Neil’s question, as Brenda explains later, is that she recently had her nose fixed and does not want to be close to the net unless she is sure it is so dark that her opponent can’t return the ball (Roth, 1959, p. 13).

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