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Contributions of empathy and emotion identification to subclinical paranoia

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Paranoia has been associated with a multitude of social cognitive deficits in both clinical and non-clinical populations. In schizophrenia, empathy is significantly and broadly impaired, but its relationship with paranoia is unknown. Furthermore, deficits in emotion identification (EI) are present in both clinical and non-clinical paranoia and may underlie relationships between paranoia and empathic processing. The current investigation aimed to examine associations between paranoia, empathy and emotion identification in the general population. Structural equation modeling (SEM; N=226) revealed a direct effect of the empathy fantasy subscale on paranoia, such that higher fantasy was associated with more severe paranoia ($p=.002$). No other empathy subscales were associated with paranoia. The empathic concern subscale was negatively associated with EI, with higher empathic concern related to worse EI ($p=.004$). Paranoia and EI were not significantly associated and all indirect paths through EI were non-significant. These results add to previous literature demonstrating relationships between the fantasy subscale and delusion severity in both schizophrenia and psychosis-risk populations, by showing that this perspective-tasking aspect of empathy may contribute to delusional thinking in the general population. Relationships with empathy were limited by self-report, and performance-based measures are recommended for future research.