



# The Role of Self-Disclosure in Typical Observers' Empathy Towards an Autistic Person

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**Study Goal:** To investigate whether knowing that a person is autistic increases empathy towards them

## Background

The *double empathy problem* theory (Milton, 2018) highlights that it is not only autistic individuals who struggle with empathy; neurotypical people may also struggle to understand the minds of autistic people and empathize with them. Inspired by this theory, the present study focuses on neurotypical participants' empathy towards an autistic person and the role of autism self-disclosure in this process. Educators and clinicians often recommend autistic people to share that they are autistic/have a diagnosis of autism to help coordinate expectations with their social environment. Here we explored the effect of self-disclosure on empathy.

## The Empathic Accuracy paradigm

1. A social target (storyteller) is videotaped sharing a story and rates their emotions and feelings:
2. Perceivers (participants) watch the videos and rate the emotions and feelings of the social target:



negative positive

While telling this story, how much \_\_\_\_ did you feel?



negative positive

While telling this story, how much \_\_\_\_ do you think the speaker felt?

3. Measures of Empathic Accuracy are extracted based on the concurrence between the social target and the perceivers.

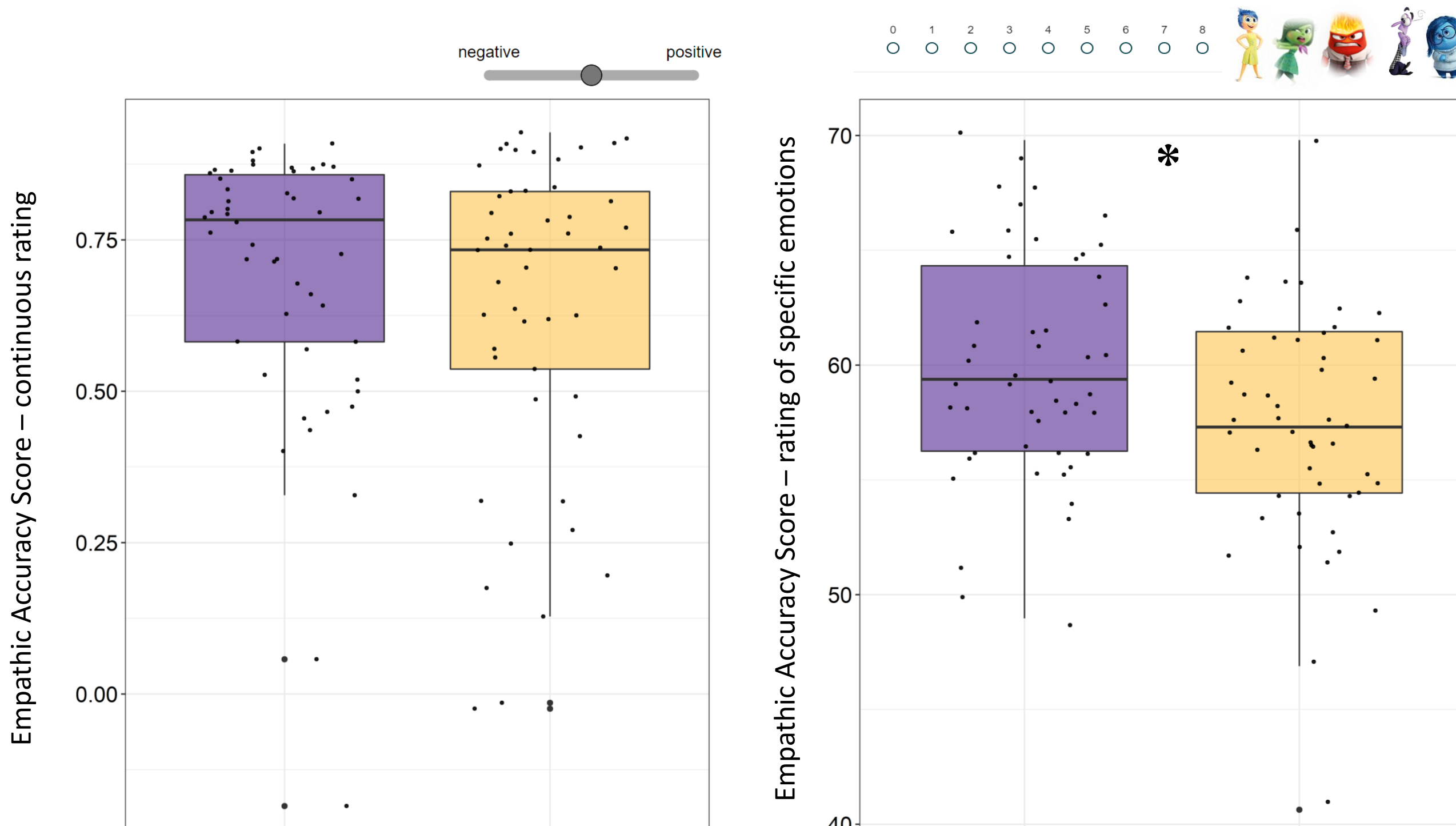
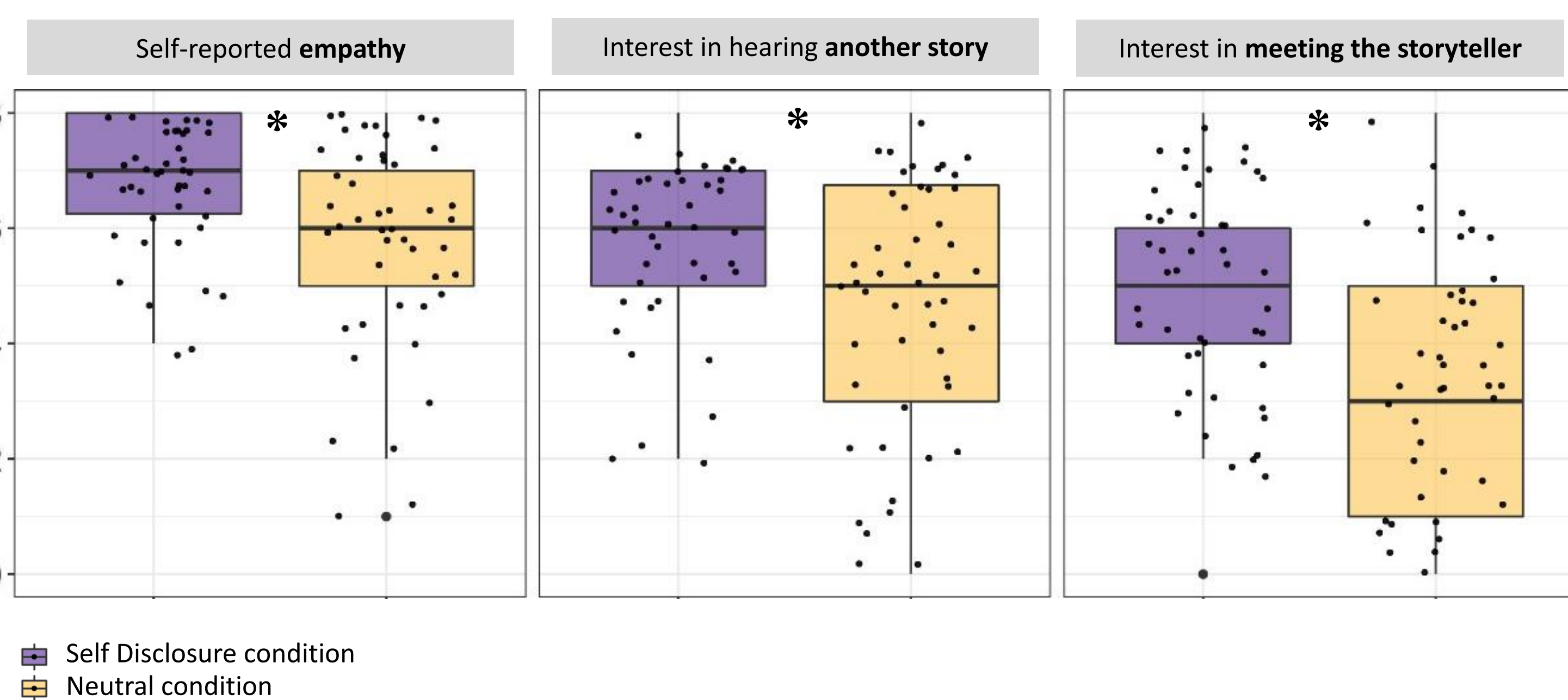
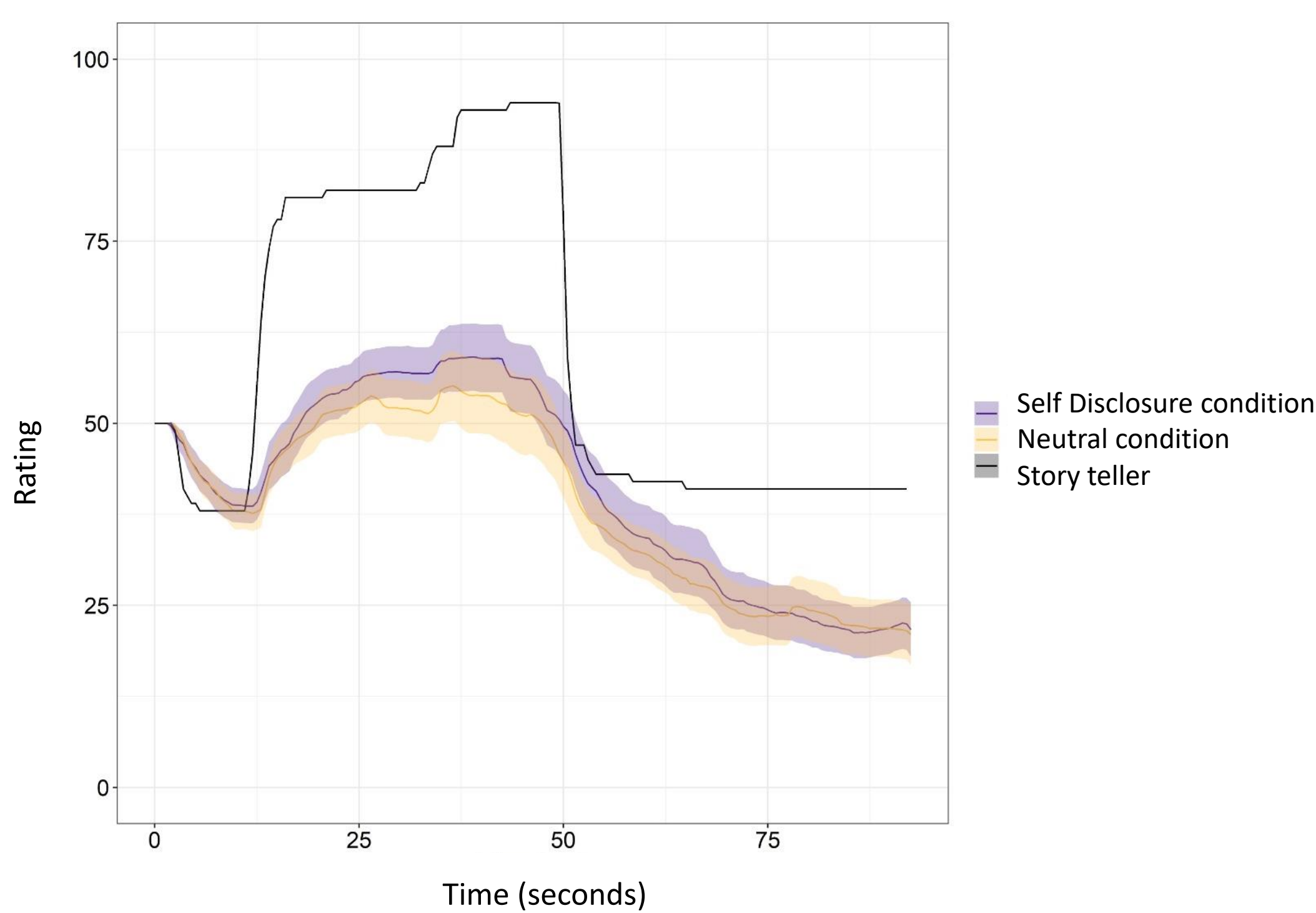
\* ILLUSTRATION PICTURES: THE INDIVIDUALS IN THE EXAMPLATORY PICTURES ARE **NOT** PARTICIPANTS IN THE STUDY

## Method

- ➔ The study was based on an established methods called the Empathic Accuracy paradigm (Zaki et al., 2009; Jospe et al., 2020; see figure above)
- ➔ An Israeli Hebrew-speaking autistic adult was video-recorded sharing an emotional autobiographical memory and then, watching his own video, continuously rated his feelings during the video, using a positive to negative rating scale. He also rated specific emotions (e.g., happiness, sadness, embarrassment) that he did or did not feel while sharing the story on a scale of 0 to 8.
- ➔ Neurotypical participants (psychology undergraduates, N=101, Mean age=24 (SD=3.2), 70% females) were asked to watch the video and continuously rate the target's positive to negative feelings, and his specific emotions to the degree they believed he felt them. Measures of empathic accuracy (EA) were derived from the concurrence between the target's and the perceivers' ratings for both the continuous and the specific emotions' ratings.
- ➔ Perceivers were also asked to report the degree to which they listened to the target, empathized with him, and were interested in hearing more stories from him or meeting him.
- ➔ Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions:
  - **Self-Disclosure Condition** - watching the video following a pre-recorded introduction in which the target disclosed his autism (n=50); or
  - **Neutral Condition** - watching the video following an introduction that did not disclose the target's autism (n=51).

## Results

Participants in the self-disclosure condition performed better in the specific emotions EA measure ( $t_{(97.91)}=2.6, p=.01, d=0.52$ ), reported more empathy ( $t_{(79.89)}=3.34, p=.007, d=0.66$ ), more interest in hearing another story from the target ( $t_{(87.96)}=3.82, p=.001, d=0.76$ ), and meeting him ( $t_{(96.23)}=3.62, p=.002, d=0.72$ ). No significant differences were found for the continuous EA measure or self-reports of listening to the story.



## Conclusions

- ➔ Knowing that a storyteller is autistic improved the observer's ability to accurately judge the degree to which the storyteller felt various emotions (according to the storyteller's own reports) and also enhanced self-reported empathy towards the autistic storyteller and self-reported motivation to know him better.
- ➔ The self-reported measures could also be potentially explained by social desirability (i.e., people might like to appear rather than be more empathic towards a person they know to have autism).
- ➔ However, taken together with the improved accuracy in identifying the target's emotions - **the results indicate that typical people are more empathic towards autistic people who self-disclose their autism.**