

The Effect of Task Type on State Empathy

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Introduction

- Trait-based research identifies Affective Sharing (AS), Empathic Concern (EC), and Perspective-Taking (PT) as distinct empathy constructs
- State-level studies claiming to assess these constructs typically lack within-subjects task manipulations
- Do tasks designed to elicit different empathic constructs elicit differential state-level responses?**
 - How do trait empathy scales relate to state-level scores on different empathy constructs?
 - Are gender differences in empathy driven by a particular empathic construct?

Methods

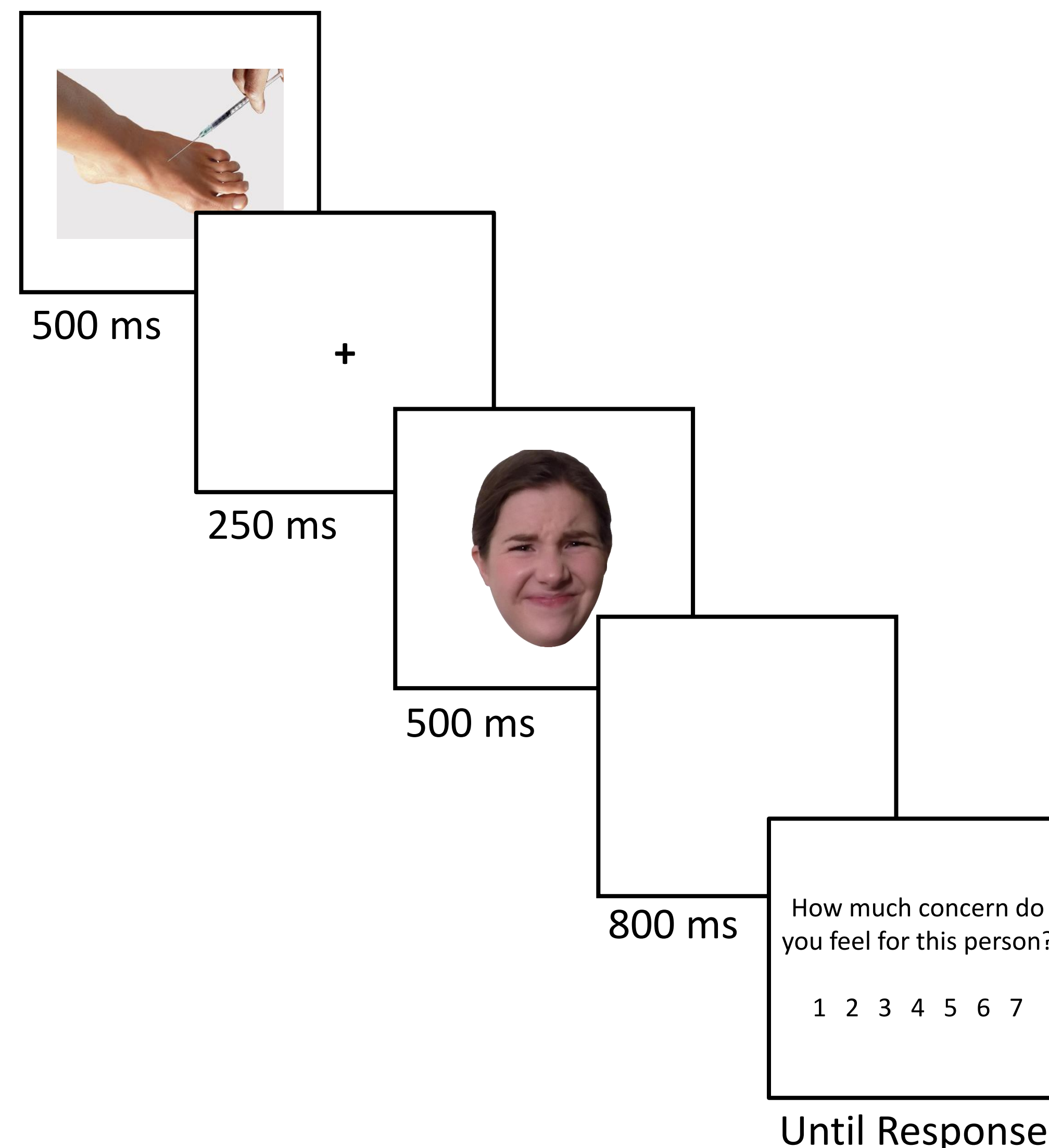
Participants:

- $N = 148$ (32 men, 112 women, 5 other)
- Age range 17-28 ($M = 20.46$, $SD = 2.07$)

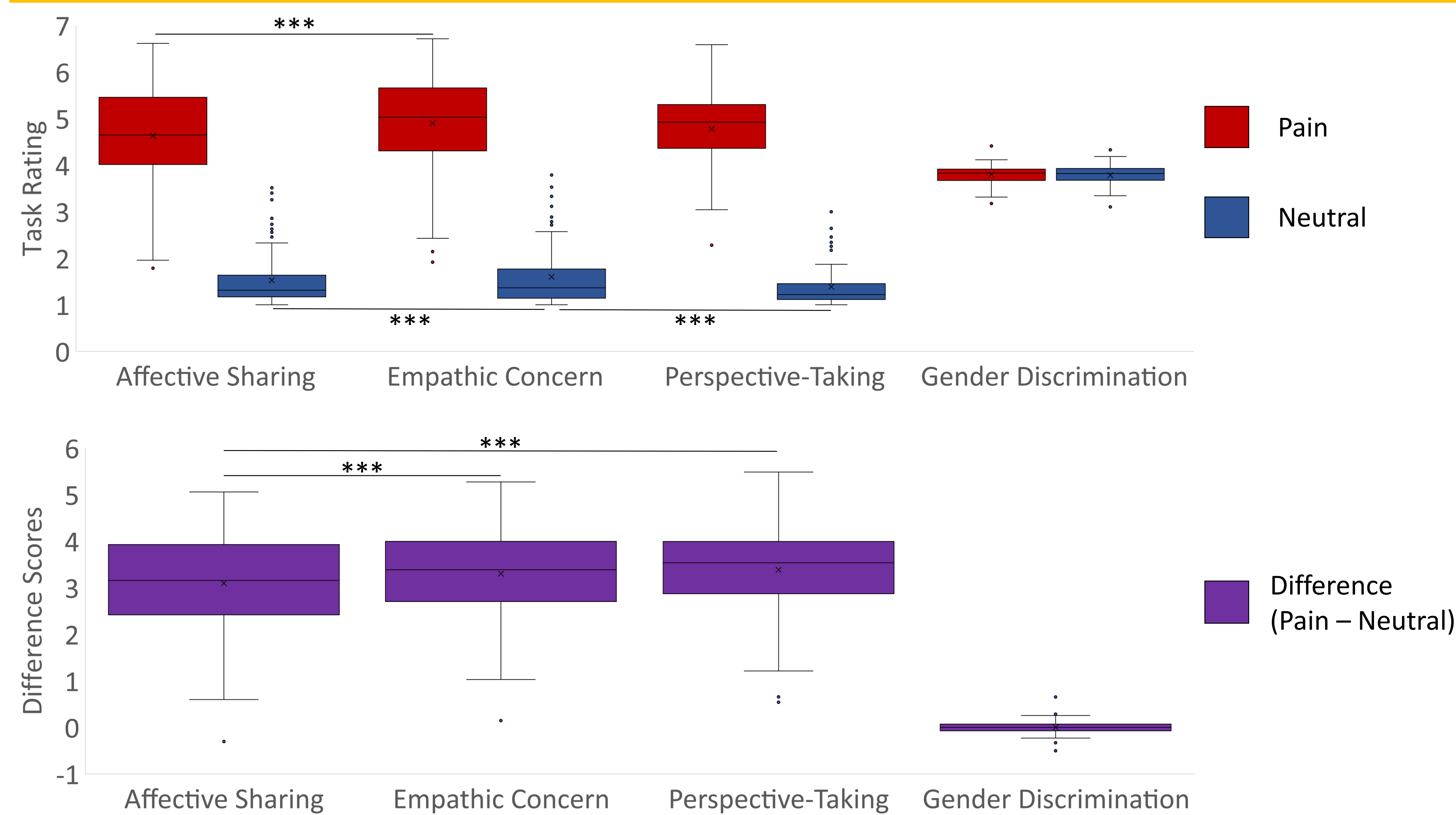
Materials:

- Trait Measures:**
 - Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ)
 - Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI)
- Stimuli:**
 - Priming Stimuli: IAPS subset (Meng et al., 2012)
 - Face Stimuli: Delaware Pain Database
- Tasks (Self-report Likert scales):**
 - AS: How much discomfort do you feel right now?
 - EC: How much concern do you feel for this person?
 - PT: How much pain do you think this person is in?
 - GD: How male or female does this person look?

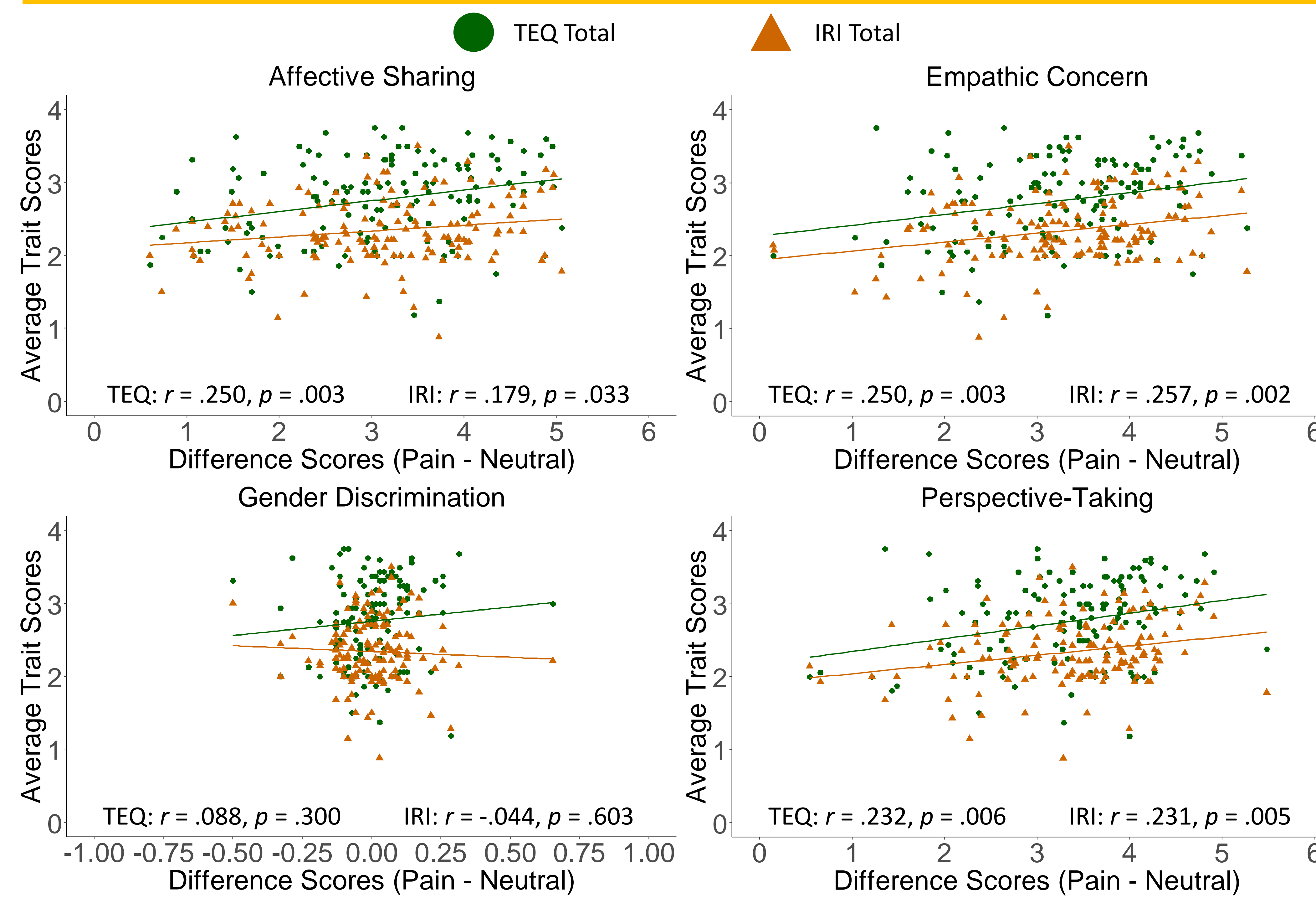
Procedure:



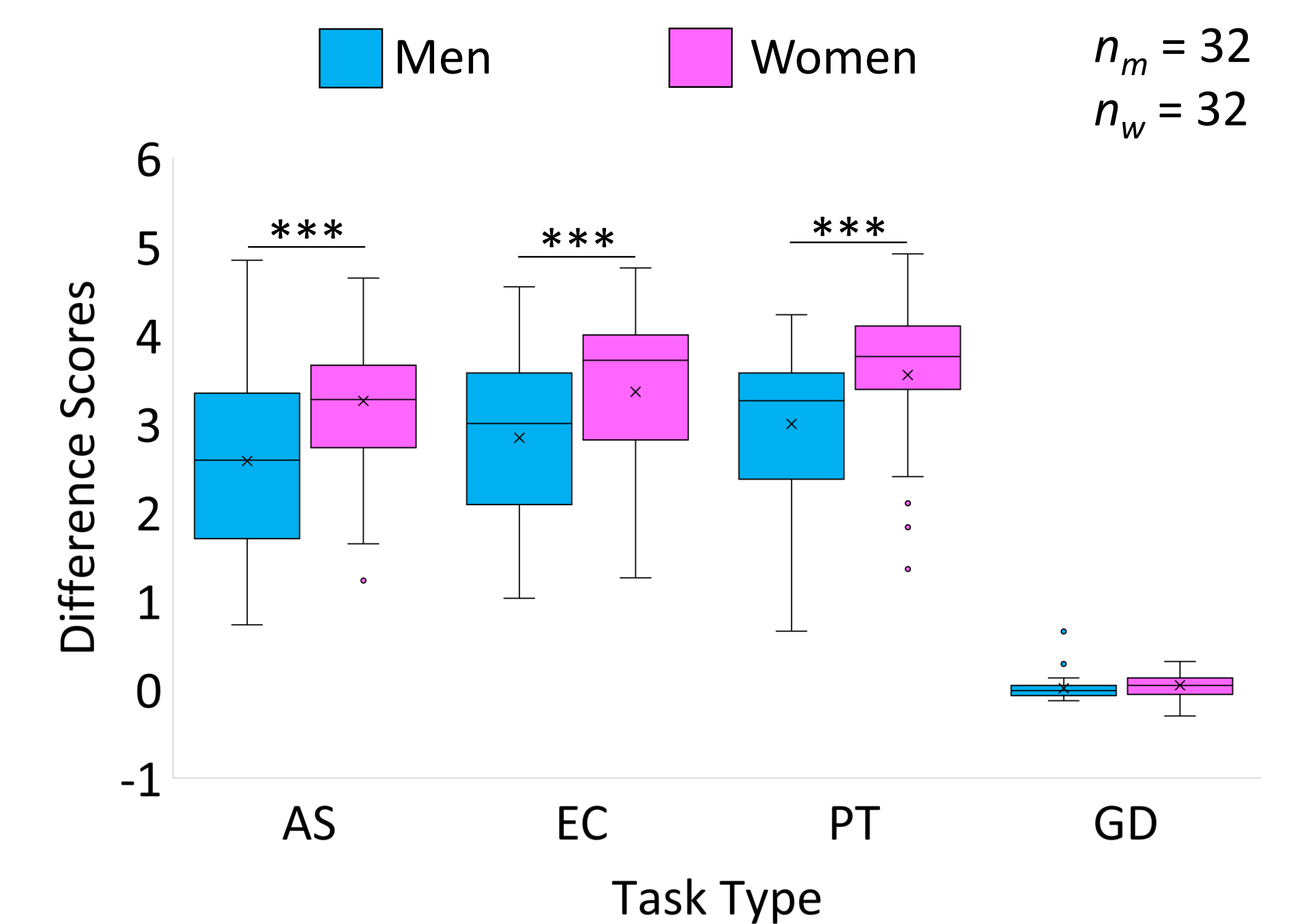
Results: State Empathy ($N = 148$)



Results: State-Trait Correlations ($N = 148$)



Results: Gender Effect



Discussion

Interpretation of Results:

- Differences between AS and cognitive empathy are congruent with the self-other distinction that is definitional of empathy
- EC may be directly proportional to PT rather than indistinguishable from it
- Task differences for neutral stimuli may reflect increased social desirability bias in EC task
- EC may not be the most important construct for trait-state relationship, contrary to Spreng et al. (2009)
- The typical gender effect for empathy is global and not driven by a specific empathic construct

Limitations and Future Directions:

- Behavioural methods only capture the final product of empathic processing
- Unclear whether certain empathic constructs are differentially modulated by stimulus type/order
- Strong intercorrelations between different trait measures of empathy and their subscales
- ERP study in progress will tease out temporal dynamics of empathic processing
- This study also tests whether different empathy constructs are associated with different ERP components

