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Syntactic Comprehension in Healthy Aging: Evidence from Socially Disadvantaged Population

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Abstract

Even in healthy aging, maintaining autonomy poses cognitive challenges, with language comprehension playing a central role. Socially disadvantaged populations—characterized by lower education, lower-skilled occupations, and limited access to services—are expected to be particularly vulnerable, yet remain underrepresented in cognitive aging research. This study examined linguistic and cognitive performance in two groups of healthy older adults (OA): one socially disadvantaged and one with high educational and socioeconomic attainment. Two control groups of young adults, matched on the same social variables, completed identical tasks.

Socially disadvantaged OA performed worse than both their age-matched peers and their young counterparts, with particular difficulties in comprehending syntactically complex sentences. In contrast, higher-attainment OA did not differ from their young controls. This asymmetric pattern suggests that age-related difficulties in syntactic comprehension are not inevitable but strongly modulated by socioenvironmental factors, supporting the view that core syntactic mechanisms can remain largely preserved in healthy aging.