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IN LIFE AS ON PAPER? THE INFLUENCE OF EMOTIONS ON PERSONALITY PERCEPTIONS IN AN INTERACTIVE SETTING

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Abstract

Emotion expressions have been shown to influence the perception of the personality of the expresser. Thus, individuals who show anger are perceived as higher in dominance and lower in affiliation than those who show sadness; whereas smiling individuals are often perceived as high in both. However, this research has been exclusively conducted based on emotion expressions shown in still photos or short, contextless videos, or even by describing emotional reactions in vignettes. Yet, typically, emotions occur in social interactive environments. In such a case, a perceiver may hold information not only about the emotional reaction of their interaction partner but also information about the person such as their formal status. This may moderate the impression formed based on the expressed emotions. Accordingly, the present research aimed to assess the impact of emotion expression on personality judgments in a realistic interactive setting involving customer complaints.

Two-hundred forty-three men and women who assumed the role of a customer service agent in charge of complaints, interacted with men and women of high and low social status who presented a complaint in either an angry, sad, or smiling demeanor. In this richer environment, emotions were found to have a strong impact on perceptions of dominance and affiliation, whereas other status related variables, had no or only a weaker effect.

Keywords: Emotion expressions, social perception, complaints, dominance, affiliation, interactive setting

When we observe the emotional reactions of others, we do not only learn something about how they feel but we also can draw inferences about who the person is. Thus, observers use emotional responses to determine the social status of the expressers (Tiedens, 2001), their social dominance and affiliativeness (Hareli, Shomrat, & Hess, 2009; Hess, Blairy, & Kleck,

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2000; Knutson, 1996), their level of competence (Tiedens, 2001; Tiedens, Ellsworth, & Mesquita, 2000), how likeable they are (Clark & Taraban, 1991; Tiedens, 2001; Tiedens et al., 2000), their credibility and trustworthiness (Aguinis, Simonsen, & Pierce, 1998; Golding, Fryman, Marsil, & Yozwiak, 2003; Hareli, Harush, et al., 2009; Oosterhof & Todorov, 2009) and their personality characteristics more generally (Hareli & Hess, 2010; Trope, 1986). Yet, much of the evidence for these effects comes from research in which the other's emotional reactions are presented in ways atypical for the real-life situations in which people actually encounter such emotions. Specifically, some of these studies used vignettes in which a given encounter needs to be imagined by the observers (see e.g., Hareli & Hess, 2010; Tiedens, 2001). Other research used richer stimuli such as still photos (Hess et al. 2000; or videos, see e.g., second study in, Tiedens, 2001; and, in, Hareli, Shomrat, & Hess, 2009). By contrast interactional settings, in which emotions are exchanged between interaction partners have been less often used (Hareli & David, 2017; Hareli, Halhal, & Hess, 2018; van Kleef et al., 2004a, 2004b). Yet, even in the studies by van Kleef et al. participants did not actually see their interaction partner's emotions but rather responded to emotional messages transmitted in a computer chat like interface. Likewise, in the studies by Hareli et al. participants were just passive observers of social interactions and not actually involved in them.

Thus, this line of research, even though it has produced a coherent body of findings, has not actually been conducted in a setting where participants can see another person in an interactive setting. One reason for this is certainly the very real problem of experimental control in an unconstrained setting. However, as a consequence, research often fails to capture the rich and dynamic nature of real-life situations in which people actually make judgments on the basis of their perception of the emotions expressed by their partners in a flow of interactions. Thus, it remains unclear whether in real-life encounters emotion expressions impact on personality judgments or whether the impoverished nature of the interaction makes the emotional information unduly salient. This criticism, by and large, echoes the problems raised by Parkinson and Manstead (1993) regarding vignettes in general. Specifically, in real life, people are not uninvolved observers of a single event but rather involved participants in an ongoing interaction. Hence, their actual reactions may depend on more complex information than what is typically presented in a vignette. Also, their reactions may be formed via automatic processes that cannot be tapped by the imagining events. The goal of the present research was to study the social perception of emotions using a paradigm that enables observers to be more involved in a social encounter. The research focuses specifically on the perception of dominance and affiliation.

These two behavioral tendencies are central for social interactions (Hinde, 1974). In fact, people unconsciously take note of dominance cues in their environment (Moors & De Houwer, 2005). A number of studies has investigated perceptions of these dimensions based on facial appearance cues, including emotion expressions (Hess, Blairy, et al., 2000; Knutson, 1996; Zebrowitz, Fellous, Mignault, & Andreoletti, 2003; Zebrowitz, Kikuchi, & Fellous, 2007).

Why are emotion expressions diagnostic of personality?

Hareli and Hess (2010) content that emotions are diagnostic for personality judgments, because participants can use them to infer information about the expresser over and above emotional state information. They base their argument on appraisal theories of emotion.

According to appraisal theories of emotion, emotions are elicited and differentiated through a series of appraisals of (internal or external) stimulus events according to the perceived nature of the event. Lazarus (1991) suggested that each type of emotion is therefore characterized by a typical 'core relational theme.' Core relational themes describe the kind of

perceived relationship between the person and the environment that gives rise to a given emotion. Observers are aware of these general relationships between emotions and the "stories" they tell (Hareli & Hess, 2010; Parkinson, 1999, 2001) and hence can 'reverse engineer' the relationship between the person and the event based on the emotion expressed (Frijda, 1986).

Overall, research indicates that information about the emotions that a person experiences indeed informs observers about their personality, including dominance and affiliation. However, as mentioned above, most of this research was conducted by providing observers with information concerning a target's emotions using still pictures of facial expressions of emotions (Hess, Blairy, et al., 2000; Knutson, 1996) or videos in which the emotional expression appeared (see e.g., Hareli, et al., 2018; Hareli, et al., 2009; Tiedens, 2001). In all such cases, the observer is a relatively uninvolved and passive perceiver of the reaction. Yet, in real life, people encounter others' emotions most frequently while interacting with them. That is, the encounter with the other's emotions typically happens in a much richer environment in which the perceiver is more than just an uninvolved observer.

Importantly, dominance and affiliation describe not just how individuals behave, but how they behave in relation to others (Hinde, 1974). In this vein, for example, Dillard, Palmer, & Kenney (1995) content that communication episodes tend to focus the interactants' attention on these dimensions. It is therefore particularly relevant to study them in an interactive context. This was the goal of the present study. Specifically, we assessed personality judgments made by observers based on another person's emotions when the observer interacts with this other. For this, we assessed judgments of dominance and affiliation made by service providers who witnessed the emotions of a costumer complaining to them about a service or a product.

In this context, two other variables deserve attention: social status and gender. Status information can be derived from relatively stable cues such as the occupational role of a person, but also from the emotions that an individual expresses in a given situation (Tiedens, 2001). To the degree that dominance is also an important 'status sign' (Mazur, 1985) the knowledge that a person has a certain status can potentially also influence the attribution of dominance to that person. This is similar to the effect that individuals who are high in status are also perceived as taller (Wilson, 1968). Gender in turn is not only another status indicator (Eagly, 1983) but also directly linked to perceptions of dominance and affiliation in that men's faces are perceived as more dominant and women's as more affiliative (Hess, Adams, & Kleck, 2005). Hence, in the present research both the formal status (occupation) and the gender of the interaction partner were varied. Importantly, recent research suggests that information derived from nonverbal communication may be more informative for participants than status information derived from occupation. Thus, Küster, Krumhuber and Hess (in press) found that occupational stereotypes drove perceptions of dominance when this was the only information provided. However, when posture was also shown, this information tended to overshadow the occupation information.

The present research

We asked participants to assume the role of a customer service agent in charge of complaints. Complaints were presented in either an angry, sad, or smiling- affiliative demeanor. Smiling-affiliative was chosen as the appropriate positive affect (rather than, for example, happy) as the type of interaction (a complaint) makes happiness an incongruous positive emotion to show. As customer service agents, the participants had access to the customer's file, which included information on the customer's profession, which was varied to reflect a high and low status profession respectively. For the present research, we created a virtual interaction, using a video interface, which allowed for several exchanges between the

participant and the virtual interaction partner with a high degree of realism. Following the conclusion of the interaction, participants were asked to rate the dominance and affiliation of the complainant.

Method

Participants

A total of 480 participants (194 men and 92 who failed to report their gender) with a mean age of 27 years (SD = 6.7) participated in groups of 16 to 18. Participants were recruited from a list of individuals who had previously indicated their willingness to participate in research and received $10. They had on average 4 years (SD = 3.2) of customer service experience. This sample allows the detection of a small to medium effect (f=.14) with 80% power.

Material

Based on a pretest two complaint topics were chosen. One concerned a refrigerator repair and the other a defective pair of pants. To provide a better range of complaints and to enhance ecological validity, two versions of the complaint were constructed. Each complaint was presented by two men and two women in either a smiling-affiliative, angry or sad demeanor. In addition, several responses to additional questions were taped to allow for a continued interaction.

As a manipulation check, the material was rated by 12 (9 women) participants regarding the emotional demeanor. Anger displays were rated as expressing more anger (M = 5.35, SD = .91) than were sad (M = 1.04, SD = 1.32) or smiling-affiliative displays (M = 1.21, SD = 1.47), $F(2,22) = 171.97$, $p < .001$. Conversely, sad displays were rated as expressing more sadness (M = 4.56, SD = 1.50) than were angry (M = .90, SD = 1.22) or smiling affiliative displays (M = 1.29, SD = 1.50), $F(2,22) = 55.27$, $p < .001$. Replicating findings by Hess et al. (2000) both smiling affiliative (M = 2.71, SD = 1.54) and sad displays (M = 2.15, SD = 1.44) were rated as affiliative, compared to angry displays (M = .54, SD = .94), $F(2,22) = 33.24$, $p < .001$. Two additional complaints in a neutral demeanor were taped and used as training material.

Procedure

Participants, who had signed an informed consent form, were seated in groups of 16 to 18 in individual cubicles. They were told to assume the role of a customer service agent. They watched the complaints and then could choose additional questions.[xii] During this time they had access to a customer file, which provided information on the customer, including the customer's profession. Profession (medical doctor versus convenience store clerk) was used to manipulate formal status. When satisfied with the information obtained during their exchange with the virtual customer, participants were asked to choose a suitable compensation. Following this, participants were asked to respond to a number of questions regarding the customer. After an initial training session to familiarize participants with the video interface, each participant treated two complaints which varied in topic, emotion expression, sex of actor, as well as formal status of the actor, allowing us to treat the data in a between subjects design.

Dependent measures

Participants were asked to describe, using a series of 7-point scales anchored with 0-not at all and 6-very high, their perception of the personality of the customer (likable, trustworthy, affirmative, aggressive, self-assured, and authoritarian), as well as of the emotions shown by the customer (angry, sad, happy, indifferent). In addition, they rated the status of the customer as a manipulation check (M = 2.66, SD = 1.53 versus M = 3.31, SD = 1.74, for the clerk and the doctor respectively, $t(468) = 4.34$, $p < .001$). In line with their role as a customer service agent, they were also asked to what degree they believed the

complainants claims. Following this, they further reported on their own emotional reactions. Data from these latter questions will not be reported in the framework of the present article.

Results

A principal components analysis with varimax rotation conducted on the personality perceptions confirmed two factors, which explained 76% of the variance. Based on this analysis, two composite factors were created, dominance (affirmative, self-assured, and authoritarian, $\alpha = .80$) and affiliation (likeable, trustworthy, and aggression reversed scored, $\alpha = .69$).

To assess the impact of emotion expression, status, and gender on perceptions of dominance and affiliation, 3 (emotion expression: anger, sadness, and affiliative) x 2 (status: high and low) x 2 (gender) between subjects Analyses of Variance were conducted on dominance and affiliation. A main effect of emotion, $F(2, 458) = 292.40$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .56$, emerged for dominance, such that customers were rated as most dominant when showing an angry demeanor and least dominant when showing a sad demeanor with the affiliative demeanor in the middle (see Figure 1). A main effect for customer gender, $F(1, 458) = 6.70$, $p = .010$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$, was qualified by a marginally significant emotion x customer gender interaction, $F(2, 458) = 2.68$, $p = .070$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$. Specifically, for the angry demeanor there is no difference in dominance between men and women. However, women who show a smiling-affiliative or sad demeanor are rated as significantly more dominant than men. For affiliation only the expected main effect for emotion emerged significantly, $F(2, 458) = 190.32$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .45$ such that customers who showed an angry demeanor were perceived as significantly less affiliative ($M = 1.63$, $SD = .93$) than those who showed either a smiling-affiliative ($M = 3.79$, $SD = 1.36$) or a sad ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 1.06$) demeanor, between whom there was no difference.

Discussion

The principal goal of the present research was to study the impact of emotional reactions on attributions of personality, in a highly realistic interactional setting. Participants were not passive observers who saw a photo or read a story, but had to interact with the virtual customer by asking questions and making a decision about the customer's request. These activities provided them with an actual stake in the interaction. In this richer environment, emotions were found to have a strong impact on perceptions of dominance and affiliation, whereas other status related variables, had no or only a weaker effect.

Specifically, as predicted, the emotions shown by the customer during the interaction had an impact on the personality attribution to that customer such that angry customers were perceived as more dominant and less affiliative than were sad or smiling-affiliative customers.

Interestingly, unlike in previous studies using photos or vignettes, no effect of status emerged in this context. However, this previous research on the relation between status and dominance has considered these variables outside a behavioral context. Arguably, the emotional reactions of a person in a given context provide more proximal information about a person than the status they hold based on their profession and hence should be perceived as more diagnostic for a person's personality (see also, Hareli, Sharabi, & Hess, 2011).

By contrast, gender clearly remains a cue relevant to dominance. Specifically, when the customer shows an angry demeanor both men and women are perceived as equally dominant. But it seems that showing a smiling-affiliative or sad behavior reduces perceptions of dominance comparatively to anger more for men than for women.

It is possible that this difference is due to the expectations that people hold regarding men's and women's likely reactions to different events. In general, when behaviors conform

to well-established behavioral norms, they are perceived as less diagnostic for the person (Kelley, 1967; Mischel, 1977).

Yet, the expectational norm for women is to react with more sadness to a variety of negative events, including those that are expected to primarily elicit anger (Hess, Senécal, et al., 2000). Thus, for example, participants expect a women to react with sadness rather than anger to the vandalization of her car, unless she has been explicitly identified as a dominant individual (Hess et al., 2005). Thus, showing sadness may be more expected for a woman in this context and hence be perceived as less diagnostic for her dominance.

Similarly, women are generally socialized to attempt to redress conflict in an affiliative rather than a confrontational style (Leaper & Friedman, 2007). Hence, again this expected behavior may have been perceived as less diagnostic.

Also, Brescoll and Uhlman (2008) found that anger increases status for both women and men, provided that it was clear that the anger was caused by the situation. This may imply a similar effect for dominance, as in the present study the anger was clearly referenced to the complaint.

In sum, the present research shows the impact of emotions in an interactive context. Interestingly, the use of this richer context also provided suggestive evidence for the notion that such status related variables as occupational status or gender, may be either less diagnostic for an interaction than actual behavior or qualified by the specific norms and expectations for that interaction, something that may be less apparent when stimuli are presented outside an interactional context. Overall, this study emphasizes the importance of studying social perception of emotions in the context of social interactions and points towards the possible unique effects of such an environment. Moreover, it also offers a paradigm that enables to have a rich and interactional setting for the study of social perception of emotions without losing experimental control.

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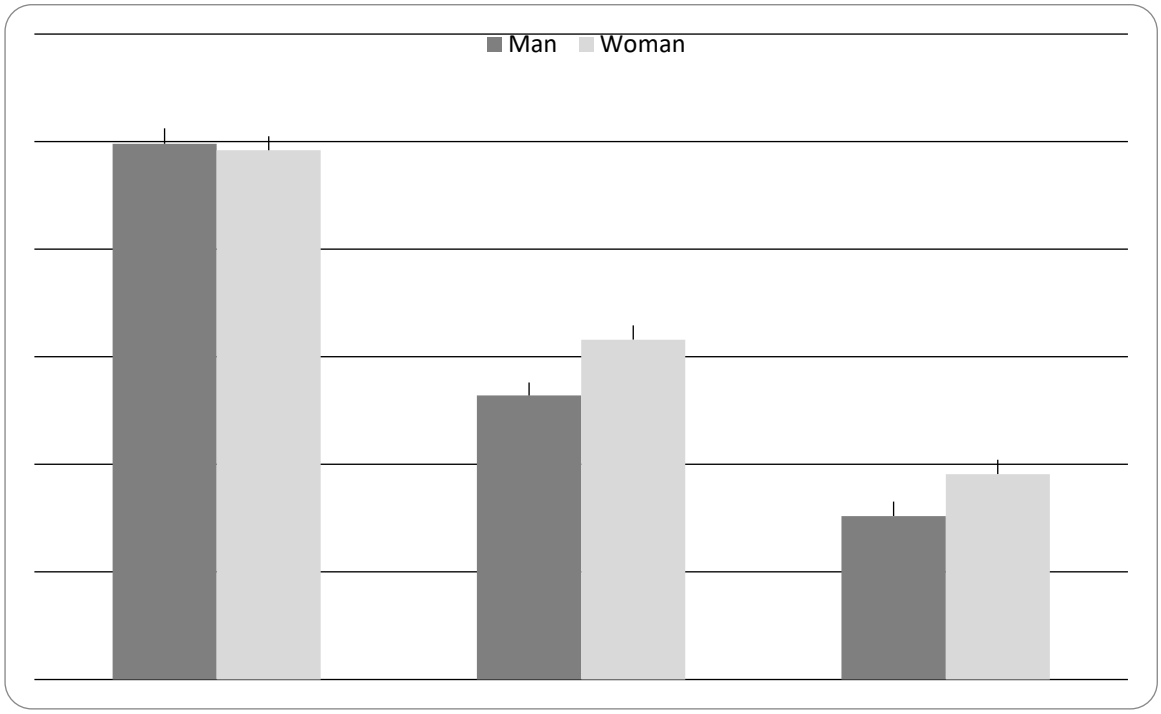
Figure Caption
Figure 1. Mean dominance rating as a function of customer emotion and gender



[xii] In 64.8% of the interactions at least one question was asked