STUDIES IN EMOTION AND SOCIAL INTERACTION

Group Dynamics and Emotional Expression

EDITED BY

Ursula Hess

Pierre Philippot

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Group Dynamics and Emotional Expression

The study of emotional expressions has a long tradition in psychology. Although research in this domain has extensively studied the social context factors that influence the expresser's facial display, the perceiver was considered passive. This book focuses on more recent developments that show that the perceiver is also subject to the same social rules and norms that guide the expresser's behavior and that knowledge of relevant emotion norms can influence how emotional expressions shown by members of different groups are perceived and interpreted. Factors such as ethnic-group membership, gender, and relative status all influence not only emotional expressions but also the interpretation of emotional expressions shown by members of different groups. Specifically, the research presented asks the question of whether and why the same expressions shown by men or women, members of different ethnic groups, or individuals high and low in status are interpreted differently.

Ursula Hess is Professor of Psychology at the University of Quebec at Montreal. She received her Ph.D. in psychology from Dartmouth College and is a Fellow at the Association for Psychological Science. Her current research is in the area of emotion psychology – in particular, the communication of affect with an emphasis on two main lines of research: psychophysiological measures and the role of social influences in the encoding and decoding of emotional expressions.

Pierre Philippot is Professor of Psychology at the University of Louvain in Belgium. He is also a Master of Research at the Belgium National Science Foundation. He received his Ph.D. in psychology from the University of Louvain. He has published many books and written many articles for international, peer-reviewed scientific journals.

STUDIES IN EMOTION AND SOCIAL INTERACTION

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Continued on page following Index

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Edited by
Ursula Hess
University of Quebec at Montreal

Pierre Philippot
University of Louvain, Belgium

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Contributors

Reginald B. Adams, Jr.
The Pennsylvania State University

Patrick Bourgeois
University of Quebec at Montreal

John F. Dovidio
University of Connecticut

Hillary Anger Elfenbein
University of California, Berkeley

Michelle Hebl
Rice University

Ursula Hess
University of Quebec at Montreal

Robert E. Kleck
Dartmouth College

David Matsumoto
San Francisco State University

Pierre Philippot
University of Louvain

Jennifer Richeson
Northwestern University

J. Nicole Shelton
Princeton University

Stephanie A. Shields
The Pennsylvania State University

Kristi Lewis Tyran
Western Washington University

Leah R. Warner
The Pennsylvania State University

Yanélia Yabar
University of Canterbury, New Zealand

Introduction: The Tale I Read on Your Face Depends on Who I Believe You Are

Introducing How Social Factors Might Influence the Decoder's Interpretation of Facial Expression

Pierre Philippot and Ursula Hess

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Introduction

More than three decades ago, the study of emotional facial expression saw a spectacular development (Ekman & Friesen, 1971; Izard, 1972). To date, this impetus does not seem to have lessened. From the beginning, research on emotional facial expression has been grounded in a Neo-Darwinian theoretical framework (Tomkins, 1980). In this framework, facial expressions are considered as innate signals that have evolved phylogenetically to fulfil important adaptive functions. In a social species such as ours, effective coordination among conspecifics is vital. By conveying information about individuals' inner state and behavioral intent, facial expression plays an important role in social coordination.

From this perspective, a wealth of research has demonstrated that, indeed, emotional facial expressions were decoded at a clearly much better than chance level, within and among many cultures (Kupperbusch, Matsumoto, Kooken, Loewinger, Uchida, et al., 1999). This observation supported the notion that emotional facial expressions are foremost an innate signal. However, there is also evidence that this innate signal can be modulated by social conventions: so-called display rules (Matsumoto, 1998). Through social and cultural shaping, people learn how to suppress, minimize, maximize, or alter their facial displays to convey socially prescribed emotional attitudes.

Looking back at these three decades of research on nonverbal communication, a striking feature emerges: Most of it has focused on the decoder's performance. That is, this research has been primarily devoted to establishing whether emotional facial expressions are accurately decoded and to identifying decoder characteristics that are predictive of a better decoding performance. Little attention has been devoted to those characteristics of the encoder (i.e., the expressing individual) that might influence how their facial expression is attended to and interpreted. In fact, this lack of interest for encoder characteristics is congruent with the Neo-Darwinian perspective that dominates the field: If emotional facial expressions are indeed strong innate signals and act as unconditioned stimuli (Öhman, 1999), they result from automatic processes that leave little room for variation. Thus, there are few reasons to investigate how individual differences or personal characteristics might modulate such an automatic and biologically determined behavior.

However, the recent interest of social cognition for emotion in general, and facial expression in particular, has somewhat challenged the notion that encoder characteristics are of little interest for the study of nonverbal facial communication. Indeed, it is now established that emotion plays a critical role in the formation, activation and maintenance of attitudes and stereotypes (Fiske, 1998; Hugenberg & Bodenhausen, 2004). Moreover, stereotypes also include emotional information. For instance, some emotions, like anger, might be stereotypically attributed to members of an outgroup whose stereotype is connotated by aggressivity (Philippot & Yabar, 2005). Also, more refined emotions are preferentially attributed to ingroup members, whereas more basic emotions are overly attributed to outgroup members (Paladino, Leyens, R. Rodriguez, A. Rodriguez, Gaunt, & Demoulin, 2002).

This social-cognitive perspective thus suggests that the activation of stereotypes must result in congruent biases in the interpretation of

outgroup versus ingroup members' facial expressions of emotion. For instance, the facial expression of an individual from a group that is stereotyped as violent and aggressive might be perceived as more angry than the same facial expression displayed by an individual from a group that is not stereotyped as violent or aggressive.

The question raised is thus whether the interpretation of a given facial expression might be modulated by the a priori or stereotype that the decoder holds regarding the encoder. This formulation of the question makes it obvious that a crucial aspect of the understanding of emotional nonverbal communication rests in the *interaction* between the sender/encoder and the receiver/decoder. From this perspective, a nonverbal message such as a facial expression can be understood only if one considers the relationship that links the sender/encoder and the receiver/decoder and the (stereotyped) representations they hold for each other.

Is this question trivial? Evidently, we think that it is not. Our conviction is based on several considerations. At the theoretical level, the Neo-Darwinian perspective that still prevails in the field states that emotional facial expressions are powerful innate signals – which leaves little room for modulating their interpretation once they are emitted. This suggests that a display of anger is interpreted as conveying anger and threat no matter what representation the decoder might have of the encoder. In contrast, the social-cognitive perspective presented previously postulates that the interpretation of any individual information is biased by the stereotype that is attached to that individual. Facial expression decoding would not be an exception to this general rule. Hence, these two theoretical perspectives offer contrasting predictions: The Neo-Darwinian perspective implies that facial expression decoding should be minimally affected by the group membership of the sender, whereas the social-cognitive perspective predicts the opposite.

At the empirical level, one needs to recognize that in everyday life, full-blown facial expressions are by far the exception rather than the rule (except perhaps in Hollywood sit-coms). Rather, what is observed in natural settings are most often weak and transient facial expressions. Furthermore, facial expressions are not necessarily expressed in the canonic form established by emotion researchers (e.g., Ekman, Sorenson, & Friesen, 1969). Indeed, facial expressions can be expressed partially or they can be the result of blends that convey different emotions at the same time (Ekman & O'Sullivan, 1991). Thus, in real life, facial expressions rarely occur in the form of the clear, prototypical signals such as

the stimuli originally constructed by Ekman et al. (1969) – even though these extreme stimuli are the ones most often used in emotion expression research. Rather, facial expression is often weak, elusive or blended, resulting in a signal that might often be ambiguous. This ambiguity itself suggests that significant interpretive work is needed, which opens the possibility for all kinds of interpretive biases, such as those underlain by the representations that the sender/encoder and the receiver/decoder hold for each other.

In sum, there are good theoretical as well as empirical reasons to investigate whether the interpretation of facial expressions of emotion might be modulated by the characteristics that the decoder attributes to the encoder. Still, this field of research is just emerging and few directly relevant data have been collected. In this volume, we aim to present the recent theoretical and empirical developments that recognize that the perceiver is also subject to the same social rules and norms that guide the expressors' behavior. In turn, this knowledge of relevant emotion norms can influence how emotional expressions shown by members of different groups are perceived. Factors such as ethnic group membership, gender and relative status all influence not only emotional expressions but also the interpretation of emotional expressions shown by members of different groups. Specifically, the research presented here addresses the questions of whether and why the same expressions shown by men or women, members of different ethnic groups, or individuals high and low in status are interpreted differently. Possible mechanisms addressed include the physical characteristics of the face (e.g., morphological face difference between races or genders), its interaction with social rules and norms, the biasing impact of beliefs and expectations regarding members of different groups, and the impact of matches versus mismatches of expressor and decoder groups.

This book consists of eight chapters. It is introduced by a general chapter by John Dovidio and colleagues discussing social-group influences on the interpretation of emotions and their implications for everyday life. In the next section, two chapters focus on the interpretation of facial expressions of emotion shown by men and women (Leah Warner and Stephanie Shields; Ursula Hess and colleagues). Then, two chapters consider the influence of the ethnic-group membership of the expressor on emotion communication. One chapter (Hillary Elfenbein) focuses on biases in the decoding of emotional expressions, the other (Pierre Philippot and colleagues) on the influence of social- and

ethnic-group membership on reactions to facial expressions, specifically in terms of facial morphology and mimicry. Another chapter (Kristi Lewis Tyran) focuses on the influence of relative status on the interpretation of emotional expressions and the attribution of behavioral intentions to the expressor. These chapters are complemented by a chapter (David Matsumoto) that presents relevant methodological concerns particular to this area of research. Finally, a summary and integration chapter (Hess and Philippot) concludes the book.

The goal of the book is to underline the importance of understanding emotion communication in its social context. This perspective implies that the very channels that transmit the emotion signal – voice, face, posture – all also transmit information about the social context of the expressors, their sex, their age, their race and even their socioeconomic status. Thus, social context is literally embodied in the emotion signal, therefore making it impossible to consider emotion signals in social isolation.

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1. Implications of Ingroup-Outgroup Membership for Interpersonal Perceptions

Faces and Emotion

Jennifer Richeson, John F. Dovidio, J. Nicole Shelton, and Michelle Hebl

Authors' Note

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jennifer A. Richeson, Department of Psychology, Northwestern University, 2029 Sheridan Road, Evanston, IL 60208. E-mail: jriches@northwestern.edu.

Introduction

Nonverbal behavior is a critical component of social interaction. People rely on nonverbal aspects of behavior during interactions to assess how their interaction partners are feeling and how to respond to them (Feldman, Philippot, & Custrini, 1991). One aspect of nonverbal behavior that can be influential in shaping the dynamics of interpersonal interaction is the communication of emotion. Indeed, the ability to accurately decode the emotional states of others from nonverbal facial and vocal cues has been found to predict social competence (e.g., Feldman et al., 1991; Glanville & Nowicki, 2002).

Recent research suggests that cultural-group membership may play an important role in the accurate communication (i.e., encoding and decoding) of emotion (Elfenbein & Ambady, 2002a, 2002b). Building on this work, we propose that the psychological processes associated with social categorization and social identity produce systematic biases in the recognition of emotion from facial expressions across members of different groups. Thus, the present chapter examines emotional facial expression and communication in an intergroup context. To provide a general conceptual foundation for the relevance of group membership to the communication of emotion, we begin by briefly reviewing how group membership fundamentally affects the way people think