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

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Authors' Note

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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

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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

about, feel about, and act toward others. We then examine research that directly studies how group membership affects the communication of emotion in the face and how members of different groups, defined by majority and minority status, may be differentially successful at recognizing and interpreting the emotions displayed by outgroup members. We then consider the systematic nature of emotion recognition accuracy and inaccuracy through an examination of potential mechanisms that might contribute to differences in emotion recognition between members of different groups. Finally, we conclude with a conceptual analysis of how the study of facial expression complements previous research on intergroup bias and offers potentially unique theoretical and practical insights into understanding intergroup communication, miscommunication, and relations.

Psychological Impact of Group Membership

Group membership and identity have a profound influence on social perception, affect, cognition, and behavior. People spontaneously categorize others as members of social groups, and they fundamentally distinguish those who are members of their own group from those who are members of other groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). Perceptually, when people or objects are categorized into groups, actual differences between members of the same category tend to be minimized and often ignored in making decisions or forming impressions, whereas between-group differences tend to become exaggerated (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Members of other groups are generally perceived to be more similar to one another than are members of one's own group (Mullen & Hu, 1989). Paralleling these effects, at a basic perceptual level, people have more difficulty recognizing outgroup members than ingroup members, more frequently confusing outgroup members with one another (Meissner & Brigham, 2001). Cognitively, people retain more information in a more detailed fashion for ingroup members than for outgroup members (Park & Rothbart, 1982). Emotionally, people spontaneously experience more positive affect toward members of the ingroup than toward members of the outgroup (Otten & Moskowitz, 2000). And, behaviorally, people are more pro-social toward ingroup than outgroup members (Dovidio, Kawakami, Johnson, Johnson, & Howard, 1997). In part as a consequence of these biases, people have more frequent interaction with members of their own group than other groups (Brigham, 2005). Greater

contact and more frequent interaction produce greater perceptual and cognitive differentiation (Linville, Fischer, & Salovey, 1989) and present more opportunities to develop and refine the ability to interpret accurately the behaviors of others.

Taken together, the greater perceptual sensitivity, cognitive elaboration, affective reactions, and behavioral orientations that people have with ingroup than with outgroup members implicate group membership as an important factor for the communication of emotion. Specifically, these processes converge to suggest that people will show greater sensitivity and accuracy in judging the emotional expressions of ingroup than outgroup members.

A second critical element of group membership – one that also is relevant to the communication of emotion – involves the hierarchical organization of groups. In part as a consequence of the factors associated with group categorization, groups tend to relate to one another hierarchically. In fact, Sidanius and Pratto (1999) argue that this type of social dominance is a universal organizing principle in human societies. Differences in group status, in turn, influence the perceptual, cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses of group members in systematic ways. In general, people who have high social status have more freedom of movement and thus may be more open in intergroup encounters than low-status individuals. Conversely, low-status people tend to be inhibited in their actions, particularly in encounters with high-status people (see Ellyson & Dovidio, 1985). In addition, low-status people monitor the specific behaviors and reactions of their interaction partners more closely than do high-status interactants, who are more likely to rely on stereotypes based on the partner's group membership. Keltner, Gruenfeld, and Anderson (2003) argue that high power and status are associated with a general approach orientation, whereas low power and status are related to inhibition.

These processes also have direct implications for the communication of facial expressions. First, because high-status individuals are less inhibited in their behaviors than low-status individuals, members of high-status groups may be more expressive than members of low-status groups, particularly in intergroup encounters. Consistent with this, individual status exerts a strong influence on nonverbal behavior between people. In a meta-analytic review of the literature, Hall, Coats, and Smith LeBeau (2005) found that people who have higher status or social power show greater facial expressiveness than those with low status or power. Also, members of low-status groups, such as stigmatized

groups, tend to be more inhibited than members of high-status (i.e., nonstigmatized) groups in their emotional expressiveness (Frable, Blackstone, & Scherbaum, 1990). Second, because low-status individuals monitor the actions of high-status individuals particularly closely, members of low-status groups may be more accurate at decoding the facial expressions of others, particularly in intergroup situations, than high-status people (Henley, 1977; LaFrance & Henley, 1994).

In sum, social categorization initiates a range of perceptual, cognitive, and affective processes that produce more differentiated impressions of ingroup than outgroup members, which suggests that people should be more accurate at judging the emotional expressions of ingroup than outgroup members. Moreover, the closer and more frequent interaction among ingroup than outgroup members produces greater familiarity and experience that further contribute to increased accuracy in interpreting the expressions and behaviors of ingroup compared to outgroup members. However, group status may moderate this effect, such that increased accuracy in recognizing emotions from facial expressions for ingroup versus outgroup members might be more pronounced among members of low-status than high-status groups. In the next section, guided by this framework, we briefly review the literature on group differences in emotion recognition.

Group Differences in Emotion Recognition

In general, people are quite adept at recognizing the emotions displayed in the faces of members of different groups, nations, and cultures (Ekman, 1972; Izard, 1971). Largely based on these findings, emotional facial displays have been thought of as largely universal (Ekman, 1994). Despite the evidence in favor of universality, however, there is also accompanying evidence revealing cultural variations in recognizing expressions of emotion. In an effort to understand and organize the emotion recognition literature, Elfenbein and Ambady (2002a) conducted a meta-analysis of studies bearing on both the universality and cultural specificity of emotion recognition. Although they found overwhelming evidence to support the universality hypothesis – that is, participants were consistently able to detect the emotions displayed in the faces of outgroup members at better than chance levels – they also found evidence suggestive of cultural specificity. That is, they found that individuals were better able to decode the emotions expressed by individuals sharing their own cultural background than those expressed by