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Gender Differences in the Effects of Social Context on Emotional Responding



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INTRODUCTION

This study compares the effects of social cues on emotional experiences of men and women. Literature suggests that emotional responses are influenced by the presence and expressiveness of other individuals (Hess, Banse, & Kappas, 1995; Jacobs, Manstead, & Fischer, 2001; Fridlund, 1991). We examined whether social cues influence the experience of emotions differently for men and women. Research on gender differences in self-construal (Cross & Madson, 1997) led us to expect that women's own emotional reactions would be more sensitive to emotional cues from other individuals than men's.

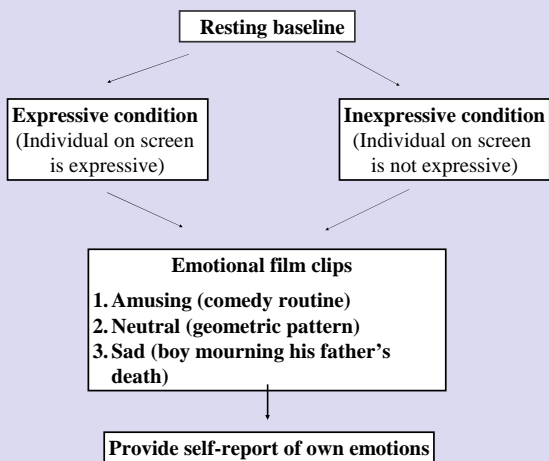
METHOD

I. Participants

42 European American college students

II. Procedure

Participants saw film clips recorded at previous study sessions. On a split screen, they saw emotional films and faces of inexpressive (inexpressive condition) and expressive (expressive condition) individuals videotaped while watching the same films.



METHOD (cont.)



Emotional film clip

Expressive condition

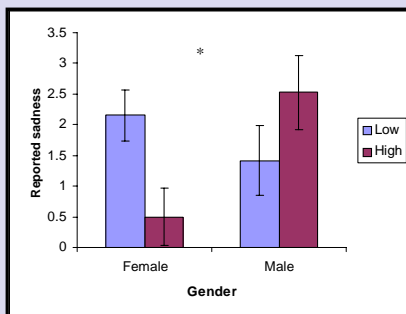
Participants were told that the correct stimulus tape was not available and asked to attend to the film only

III. Measure: Self-Reported Emotion Rating

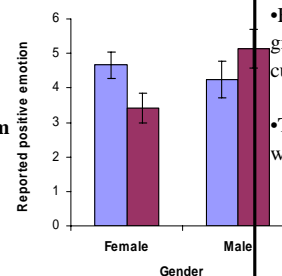
Immediately after viewing each film clip, participants rated how strongly they felt during the film using an emotion inventory (9-point scale, with 0 = "Not at all", 4 = "Moderate", 8 = "Most in my life"). Comparing to baseline, amusing film elicited increased reports of amusement, happiness, interest and sad film elicited reports of sadness.

RESULTS

Sad film



Amusing film



Two-way ANCOVAs [Gender (male; female); Condition (expressive; inexpressive)] controlling for baseline levels of subjective reports revealed significant Gender X Condition interactions for reported sadness during the sad film ($F(1,38) = 4.94, p < .05$), and reported positive emotions during the amusing film ($F(1,38) = 7.02, p < .05$)

SUMMARY

- Women reported experiencing significantly more intense positive and negative emotions in response to the films in the inexpressive condition as compared to the expressive condition.
- Men reported experiencing similar levels of positive and negative emotions in expressive and inexpressive conditions.
- These results suggest that women are more sensitive to expressive cues from other people when reacting to emotional stimuli than are men.
- Women may allocate their attention to the social cues at the expense of attending to the actual elicitors of emotion. As a result, women show dampened emotional responding in the presence of emotionally expressive strangers.
- Future studies will examine whether this pattern holds across cultural groups and across familiar and unfamiliar others presenting emotional cues.
- These results have implications for evaluating emotions of men and women in clinical contexts.

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