

PUT ON A HAPPY FACE

Put on a Happy Face: Estimating the prevalence of negative emotions and its relation to traits
of personality

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Abstract

This study examined the tendency to underestimate negative emotions in others and the phenomenology behind it. In addition, the results were assessed for possible correlations to the Big Five factors of personality. It was hypothesized that estimations of others' positive emotions would be higher than estimations of negative emotions and that this effect would be especially pronounced in individuals high in neuroticism and extroversion. Participants included 56 undergraduate college students enrolled at a small liberal arts college in the northeast United States and involved two questionnaire assessments of positive and negative emotional experience in peers as well as the Big Five trait assessment (John, Donahue, and Kentle, 1991). Results support hypothesis one but not hypothesis two. These findings are discussed in relation to human emotional experience and its impact on overall well being.

Society is a masked ball, where everyone hides his real character, and reveals it by hiding
-Ralph Waldo Emerson

Introduction

There are days in an adult's life when it is a challenge to go to work and face the pressures of the outside world. On these days, the snooze button gets hit repeatedly and an extra cup of coffee serves as encouragement to get up, get going, and put on a happy face. It isn't difficult to imagine yourself feeling down because of life stressors; maybe your pet passed away or your son is in trouble at school or you feel caught in a career you don't like. However, it is harder to imagine *other* people experiencing these negative emotions. Current research into human behavior explores this phenomenon and looks to explain the tendency to underestimate the extent to which others' experience negative emotions.

Literature Review

In order to explore and attempt to explain the human emotional experience, it is necessary to research information on not only emotions but personality and cognition as well. The body of academic research on these topics is extensive. The specific area of estimating negative emotions in others however, is not. Researchers Jordan, Monin, Dweck, Lovett, John, and Gross (2011) conducted a pilot study addressing the reasons behind the tendency to underestimate negative emotions in others. The authors posit this underestimation is due to several factors: Negative emotional experiences are more likely to occur privately and people are unable to observe others' solitary experiences. This leads to emotional pluralistic ignorance as people infer from behavior presented in public settings that people are as content privately as they appear externally. In addition, people are less likely to discuss negative experiences and prefer to suppress negative emotions. These tendencies serve to reinforce pluralistic ignorance and further enhance underestimation of negative emotions.

While Jordan et al. (2011) present the reasoning behind the tendency to underestimate negative emotions, their research does not include an exploration of the potential influence of personality traits in this inclination. The relationship between personality and emotions has been investigated by Izard, Libero, Putnam, and Haynes (1993). The researchers clarify that the difficulty in addressing the link between emotions and personality lies in methodological as well as theoretical factors relating to a lack of consensus in identifying and defining emotional experiences. This may be a reason for the absence of available data surrounding the specific issue of personality and the prevalence of negative emotions observed in others. However, there is some research examining personality traits such as the Big Five and negative emotions as observed in the self.

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A connection between extraversion and positive emotional experiences and between neuroticism and negative emotionality is presented and explored by Izard et al. (1993). The robust correlation between extraversion and dispositional positive affect is further supported by the research by Shiota, Keltner, and John in 2006. In their literature review the researchers examine the topic of positive emotions in relation to Big Five personality traits and attachment style.

The correlation between Big Five traits and emotions is also researched by Ng and Diener (2009), who examined the connection between extraversion and positive emotionality and neuroticism and negative emotionality and the role of regulation and cognition in experience. Again, this was only in relation to self-reported personal experiences and not in relation to estimates of others' emotional experiences.

Sabini, Cosmas, Siepmann, and Stein (1999) inquire into this uncommon topic in terms of estimations of others' embarrassment and other emotions. The authors address the fact that very few studies have examined expectations of others' emotions. Sabini et. al (1999) report that there are only two other studies prior to 1999. It seems people have the tendency to believe others are less emotional than they themselves are; a reflection of false consensus effect (Sabini et al., 1999). However, like Jordan et al., Sabini et al. do not address personality in relation to estimations of others' emotions.

One of the few early exceptions to this area of research was Suls and Wan (1987) who examined this area of personality in relation to estimating other's emotional experiences of fear. Like Sabini et al. (1999), Suls and Wan (1987) refer to the false consensus effect as a commonly explored aspect of social perception and related it to the false-uniqueness phenomenon. The authors highlight the false uniqueness effect which is proposed to be a factor in underestimation of common traits, experiences, or positions. It is understood as the common assumption that an individual's characteristics are more uncommon than they actually are. It is noted that this effect was found to be especially robust among those suffering from emotional disorders; namely, that they believed that their negative experiences were more unique than they actually are. The highly researched topic of attribute projection, the tendency for people to project their own qualities of personality onto others, is commonly known as the false consensus effect, and attempts to explain both under and over estimation of emotional experiences in others.

In a 1990 research study conducted by McFarland and Miller, the authors set out to explore the connection between the false consensus effect and the false uniqueness effect. Their results showed both effects occurring within the same context. The authors refer to self-enhancement tendencies as a possible explanation for their findings regarding the false uniqueness phenomenon. They concluded that under-estimating similarities between the self and others provide a self-serving boost. The issue of self-enhancement is further explored in a later study with a slightly different unit of analysis: downward social comparison.

For example Wood, Michela, and Giordano (2000), examine downward social comparison as a method of self-enhancement. The information they present is referred to as an example of a potential confounding factor in the accuracy of reports on estimates of emotional experiences in others. The authors cite the notion that when people are feeling bad they make downward social comparisons for the purpose of self-enhancement. They add recent data that supports this tendency not only when people feel bad, but when they feel good as well.

This phenomenon is identified as the selective affect-cognition priming model (proposed by Wheeler and Miyake in 1992). This model is cited as a possible reason for biased downward comparisons due to the accessibility of the present mood, positive or negative. This mood congruent tendency was explored further by researcher Rusting (1999). It was hypothesized that positive and negative moods were related to the level of positive or negative judgments and memory. It was further hypothesized that people with specific traits of personality are more prone to utilize this. Rusting (1999) classified extraversion as a positive

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emotional trait and neuroticism as a negative emotional trait and found that only during laboratory induced positive or negative moods was this significant. Wood et al. (2000) elaborates on this to state that other accessible cognitions besides mood have the ability to bias social comparisons.

By identifying that there is a tendency to make self-serving social comparisons the reliability of participant's accounts of emotional experience is brought into question. How much does a positive mood or a negative mood affect the validity of the participants reported assumptions in research based studies on personality, mood, and expression of emotion?

The issue of positive illusions and their impact on reported well-being is addressed by authors Taylor and Brown (1988). They present data supporting the strategic benefit behind maintaining positive illusions about self-evaluations, citing inflated feelings of control and overt optimism as atypical of human thought. The maintenance of these illusions functions within social situations and is observed to be a factor in self-serving biases. In this article, the authors highlight the word illusion as a more neutral substitution for bias or error. It is noted that positive personality information is more accessible than negative personality information. This inclination has been documented extensively in research regarding self-serving biases and the effect it has on self reported questionnaires.

The data available on personality, emotions, and social perceptions is extensive. It is the absence of data connecting personality and estimations of others negative emotions that led to the current research questions: namely, is there a link between personality traits and estimates of emotional experience in others? Examining previous research in this area led to the formation of two hypotheses: 1) Estimations of peers' positive emotional experiences will be higher than estimations of peer's negative emotional experiences; and 2) There is a positive correlation between the tendency to underestimate the prevalence of negative emotional experience in others and extraversion and neuroticism.

The current research project proposes to test these hypotheses and increase awareness surrounding public and privately expressed emotions and more speculatively, examine the impact of underestimating others' negative emotions.

Method

Participants

The participants (n=56) were enrolled in either an undergraduate American Sign Language class or an undergraduate psychology classes at a small liberal arts college in the northeastern U.S. The sample consisted of 13 males and 42 females between the ages of 19-40 (M=21.9).

Procedure

Participants were told that the research study was examining the relationship between personality and emotional experiences of peers prior to participating, and would involve taking two surveys: one on personality and the other on emotional experience of peers. They were informed that extra credit was not being offered and that participation would take approximately five to ten minutes. Informed consent forms were kept apart from the survey packets and collected separately to maintain anonymity and confidentiality. Participants were also verbally assured of the commitment to anonymity and confidentiality as well as the option to stop at any time.

Measurements

The survey packets included the following questionnaires: 1) the Big Five Inventory (John, Donahue, & Kentle, 1991), a 44-item likert-style questionnaire that assesses five factors of personality; and 2) Estimating Emotional Experience in Others, which was a 17- item likert-style questionnaire assessing estimations of positive and negative emotionality of peers; there were nine items for positive emotions and eight items for negative emotions. It was a questionnaire-style interpretation based on narrative scales created by Jordan et al. (2011) and 3) a demographic questionnaire (sex, age, and major).

Results

A paired sample t-test revealed that participants showed a significant difference in estimations of positive and negative emotional experience of peers $t(55) = -6.80, p < .001$. Subjects estimated greater frequency of positive emotion ($M = 3.73, s.d. = .45$) compared to negative emotions ($M = 3.10, s.d. = .48$). This is consistent with hypothesis one.

A Pearson correlation matrix revealed that there was a significant positive correlation between extraversion and estimations of frequency of others' positive emotions: $r(21) = .33, p < .02$. In addition, agreeableness was significantly positively correlated with estimations of frequency of others' positive emotions: $r(21) = .30, p < .03$. No other significant correlations were found between the remaining three factors of personality and positive emotions; however openness to experience approached significance $r(21) = .25, p < .07$ but did not meet the significance criteria ($p = .05$).

No significant correlations were found between the Big Five and estimations of peers' negative emotions.

Discussion

This research study was designed to further explore the topic of undergraduates' perception of their peers' positive and negative emotional experiences and its possible relations to the Big Five traits of personality. Participants were not asked to assess their *own* positive and negative emotional experiences (as in Jordan et al.'s study). Though intentional, (in order to reduce the invasiveness of the study), this choice limited the extent to which the results can be interpreted as underestimation versus accurate estimation. The absence of self-reported positive and negative emotionality resulted in a deficit of a basis of comparison upon which to gauge the difference between estimations of peers' emotionality and self-reported emotionality. However, the substantial research findings of Jordan et al. (2011) examining self-reported emotionality in comparison to estimation of peers' emotionality, was considered to be a solid basis on which to assume this is a significant and typical difference.

Jordan et al. (2011) reported significant results supporting the tendency to underestimate the prevalence of others' negative emotions and negative emotional experiences. The study consisted of four studies with hundreds of participants at West Coast University college campuses and revealed several significant findings. The data provided in this study was so extensive that it was considered to be an acceptable foundation for the purpose of this study.

The results of this study revealed that undergraduates estimate that their peers experience more positive emotions than negative emotions, which is consistent with Jordan et al.'s (2011) data. This finding illuminates the issue of the impact of inaccurately estimating peers emotional experiences in relational to overall well-being. Jordan et al. (2011) identify several correlations associated with underestimations; low estimations of negative emotions lead to greater loneliness, rumination, and lower life satisfaction; and in relation to this, high estimations of positive emotions also lead to lower life satisfaction. It becomes clear that inaccurate perceptions have negative consequences and further exploration of other mental health effects is vital to increase our understanding of this phenomenon.

This current research on personality traits that correlates with this tendency increases our understanding of this phenomenon. The current research results indicate that personality is not correlated with underestimating the prevalence of peers' *negative* emotions. This stands in contrast to hypothesis two and may be an accurate illustration of personality dynamics in relation to perceptual based interpretations of others' emotions. It is also necessary to consider potential confounds and limitations of the research in relation to design and phenomenology; namely, self-serving biases that occur when asked to give self-related reports on questionnaires. It is also important to note that positive personality traits are easier to recall (Ng et al. 2009). Therefore, self-serving tendencies may have led to inaccurate representations of negative aspects of personality.

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In relation to design, potential confounds include the presence of the researcher during participation and the informality of the recruitment process, (it was conducted in a classroom rather than a laboratory setting), and the lack of self-reported data on emotional experiences. Addressing these issues would be useful for the purpose of future research and utilization of different scales, possibly narration based, to assess personality is recommended.

The continued exploration of the topic of accurate perception in relation to others' emotional experiences is an essential component of understanding the human experience. It would be beneficial in terms of establishing greater understanding of the emotional states of others as well as the universality of negative emotions. Therefore, it becomes increasingly possible to address improving life satisfaction on multiple levels; including personal insights and self-acceptance; developing social support, compassion and empathy in professional and peer based settings; and ultimately resulting in greater, more accurate mental health awareness.

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