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Emotional Expressions Support the Communication of Social Groups: A Pragmatic Extension of Affective Pragmatics

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Expanding on linguistic frameworks for how speakers use speech acts to convey a variety of distinct meanings that are unachievable through words' denotations alone, Andrea Scarantino (this issue) proposes the theory of affective pragmatics (TAP) as a means to explain what signalers do with their emotions to nonverbally convey nuance in meaning. The central tenets of TAP are that emotional expressions express more than just emotions and that these expressions function as Speech Act Analogs. Yet, as he suggests in his conclusion, TAP should extend to other nonlinguistic forms of communication as well. This proposition is reminiscent of past efforts by other scholars; such as Birdwhistell's (1970) attempts to establish a nonverbal grammar. Yet, unlike those efforts, Scarantino succeeds by limiting his focus to emotional expressions, which might lay a foundation that serves as a common ingredient present throughout other various forms of communication. Here, we contend that the seeds for this may already exist in how people use information in emotional expressions to categorize social groups.

Social Groups Signaled by Facial Emotion

Discerning the groups to which another person belongs constitutes one of the most basic social psychological acts that people perform. This process of social categorization often occurs instantly upon perceiving a person, frequently outside of conscious awareness (e.g., see Macrae & Quadflieg, 2010, for review). Its rapidity, ease, and frequent accuracy suggest that it is a basic process, potentially unperturbed by the perception of ancillary and dynamic factors, such as the perceived individual's emotional expression. Yet, a growing body of research challenges this assumption, illustrating that emotions and social categories reciprocally exchange information in mutual influence over the other, with emotions exerting particular impact when social categories are ambiguous.

Perceptually Obvious Groups

To date, scholars have identified three basic category dimensions that seem to experience immediate processing upon perception: age, race, and sex (e.g., Brewer, 1988). These "big three" social categories arguably form a critical basis in person perception, privileging them in the processing of information about other people. Because of their centrality, one might expect the perception and categorization of these dimensions to be relatively fixed and immutable. Yet data show that perceptions of emotion can guide and sway how people categorize them.

For instance, Hugenberg and Bodenhausen (2003) found that White perceivers high in implicit prejudice toward Black individuals more readily perceived Black faces than White faces as displaying anger, indicating a race–anger association. Building upon this finding, they later showed that angry expressions facilitated the categorization of racially ambiguous faces as Black among implicitly prejudiced perceivers (Hugenberg & Bodenhausen, 2004). Thus, facial expressions of anger communicated race for those perceivers who implicitly associated Blackness with anger. Further demonstrating the reciprocal influence of emotional expressions and social categories, Hutchings and Haddock (2008) found that perceivers rated angry racially ambiguous faces as appearing more intensely angry when they categorized those faces as Black than when they categorized the same faces as White; thus, the perceived intensity of the emotional expression varied as a function of the face's perceived race.

Emotions also strongly interact with sex categorizations. Anger carries stereotypical associations with masculinity, whereas joy and fear relate to femininity (Birnbaum, Nosanchuk, & Croll, 1980; Briton & Hall, 1995). Furthermore, anger shares facial markers with morphological cues to male gender, and both fear and happiness expressions share facial features with cues that mark female gender (Hess, Adams, Grammer, & Kleck, 2009; see also Adams, Hess, & Kleck, 2015). These overlaps in facial cues to emotion and gender consequently bias perception: People perceive androgynous angry faces as more likely to be male and androgynous fearful or happy faces as more likely to be female (Hess et al., 2009). Reciprocally, people rate neutral male faces as angrier, less fearful, and less happy than neutral female faces (Adams, Nelson, Soto, Hess, & Kleck, 2012). Gender-emotion stereotypes thus lead to an interchange of information about how a person is feeling and what his or her sex might be.

Perceptually Ambiguous Groups

Given that even highly discernible social categories like race and sex can show susceptibility to the influence of emotional expression, it is perhaps not surprising that emotions play a

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role in the perception of groups that are largely perceptually ambiguous. For example, the stereotypical associations that link particular emotions to masculinity and femininity in impressions of gender also extend to perceptions of sexual orientation. Specifically, consistent with stereotypes of gay men as feminine and straight men as masculine, people accordingly expect gay men to express happiness and expect straight men to express anger (Tskhay & Rule, 2015). Interestingly, Tskhay and Rule (2015) found that people associate happiness with gay men and anger with straight men even when perceptions of men's femininity and masculinity are statistically controlled. This suggests a direct association between these emotions and sexual orientation distinct from the concepts of gender atypicality that usually characterize sexual orientation perception (e.g., Freeman, Johnson, Ambady, & Rule, 2010). Thus, people perceive more happiness in the faces of gay versus straight men (and more anger in the faces of straight vs. gay men) and mentally represent (or imagine) hypothetical gay and straight men as expressing happiness and anger, respectively. People seem to know this association at some level and use it to communicate sexual orientation. When asked to communicate that they were gay, both gay and straight men enacted happy expressions; when asked to communicate that they were straight, both gay and straight men enacted relatively angry expressions. Moreover, these beliefs about the link between emotion and sexual orientation reflects at least a kernel of truth, as an analysis of naturalistic photos (i.e., photos not taken in the lab) showed that gay men expressed more happiness than straight men did.

Not only can facial expressions of happiness and anger serve as valid signals to sexual orientation, they can provide information about political affiliation as well. Using tests parallel to those done with sexual orientation, Tskhay and Rule (2015) found that people's mental representations of liberals looked happier, whereas their mental representations of conservatives resembled anger. These associations also influence perceptions of actual liberals and conservatives (i.e., with happier-looking political candidates accurately categorized as liberal), and how people communicate political affiliation when asked to enact a liberal or conservative appearance. Facial expressions of emotion therefore factor into ideas about political affiliation and serve as utilized and veridical tools for communicating one's political beliefs.

More recently, research has demonstrated an association between facial expressions of emotion and social class. Happiness relates to higher social class standing—both stereotypically and, to some degree, realistically (Aknin, Norton, & Dunn, 2009; Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2002). Perceivers thus categorize faces displaying happier expressions as rich (Bjornsdottir & Rule, in press). Moreover, as the struggles of lower social class individuals typically invite negative affect, including depression (Haushofer & Fehr, 2014), perceivers accordingly tend to categorize faces with sad expressions as poor (Bjornsdottir & Rule, 2017). Most interesting, rich people's neutral faces look more positive than poor people's neutral faces (Bjornsdottir & Rule, in press). This finding supports earlier work demonstrating that one's life experiences can shape the development of static (i.e., neutral) facial structure (Adams, Garrido, Albohn, Hess, & Kleck, 2016; Malatesta, Fiore, & Messina, 1987) and suggests that the associations between emotional expressions and social class possess some validity.

Together, these accounts of overlap between emotion and both perceptually obvious and perceptually ambiguous social categories support TAP's assertion that emotional expressions communicate more than just emotion. Yet the evidence for its extent goes beyond that reviewed by Scarantino to include signals about social group memberships. The question of how this occurs still remains, however. As Scarantino outlines, emotional expressions are informative because of the natural information that they carry. That is, these expressions correlate with certain states (i.e., emotions). They also, however, correlate with particular group memberships because those emotions are associated with certain groups, either veridically or through stereotypes. When group memberships are ambiguous, such as when individuals are androgynous, mixed-race, or belong to a group that is not perceptually obvious (as with sexual orientation, political affiliation, and social class), the natural information carried by facial expressions of emotion can facilitate perceivers' social categorizations. But Scarantino critically notes that this natural emotional information varies depending on context. Indeed, context can make certain emotion–group associations salient or relevant. For example, facial expressions of anger may signal gender or sexual orientation, depending on their context. Just as Scarantino describes the partially incongruent mapping of emotional expressions to emotions, there is also not a one-to-one mapping of emotional expressions to social groups. This variability therefore relies on other pragmatic cues to resolve.

Speech Act Analogs of Social Group Signaling

By signaling group membership through facial expressions of emotion, these facial expressions can correlate with certain social motives. This relation may not necessarily occur voluntarily, as in the case of neutral faces that nonetheless communicate membership in a group without an individual's awareness or volition. Scarantino asserts that social motives belong to four general categories of communicative moves: Expressives, Imperatives, Declaratives, and Commissives, which every emotional expression performs jointly. Indeed, as signals of group membership, facial expressions of emotion both communicate an emotion and identify its associated group (an Expressive), elicit reactions from perceivers based both on the emotional state and the associated group membership (an Imperative), communicate possible elicitors of the emotion as well as the stereotypes associating them with certain social groups (a Declarative), and indicate the signaler's likely behaviors based on his or her expressed emotion and associated group memberships (a Commissive). For example, in the context of a gay bar, an angry expression on a man's face could signal anger, suggest that he is heterosexual, or both. That impression might compel other patrons of the bar to avoid him (for either reason); make salient the association between anger, dominance, and traditional masculinity; and suggest that the signaler might engage in aggressive behavior if approached.

The communication of social group memberships via facial expressions of emotion can thus be considered Speech Act Analogs along the lines of those described in Scarantino's TAP. As such, emotional expressions can convey information regarding the social groups with which they correlate, serving as

analogs of verbal statements that describe (a) social group membership, (b) the reactions that a group may elicit, (c) the stereotypes associated with a group, and (d) the behaviors that one might expect from a particular group's members. Thus, the straight man in the gay bar can simply enact an angry facial expression in place of verbally stating his sexual orientation, asserting his desire for other men to avoid him, noting his traditionally masculine traits, and hinting at his potential propensity for aggression. His emotional expression therefore communicates multiple potential pieces of information, functioning as effective nonverbal "speech acts" complete with the standard properties of implicature that govern traditionally verbal speech acts (see Thomas, 1995, for a review).

Scarantino argues that emotional expressions, functioning as Speech Act Analogs, benefit both signalers and receivers—the information they convey provides receivers with useful information and helps signalers meet their communicative goals. This aligns with and builds upon existing theories of person perception and nonverbal behavior. The ecological theory of social perception, for instance, posits that perceivers adaptively extract useful information about others from the environment (e.g., emotional states, social group memberships; McArthur & Baron, 1983; Zebrowitz & Collins, 1997). Unsurprisingly, this comports well with Fridlund's (1994) behavioral ecological view of emotions, with which TAP integrates and upon which it expands in asserting that emotional expressions benefit the signaler. As signals of social group membership, facial expressions of emotion indeed seem to benefit both the signaler and receiver. Knowledge of someone's ambiguous group memberships is clearly useful to receivers, particularly as this indicates likely behaviors (functioning as a Commissive) and stereotypes (functioning as a Declarative). For the signaler, expressing one's group membership via emotional facial expressions can be useful both simply to make a relevant membership known (i.e., an Expressive) and in order to elicit desired reactions (i.e., an Imperative). Returning again to the example of the angry male face in the gay bar, this expression allows the signaler to communicate his heterosexuality and thereby avoid the advances of other men, and enables receivers in his context to anticipate what he may be like and how he may behave. Yet, it is also not a pure signal. The man could be an affectively neutral heterosexual, whose physiognomy connotes anger (as per Hess et al., 2009; Tskhay & Rule, 2015) or just an angry gay man. Further context and co-occurring pragmatic signals require disambiguation due to the overlaps in the emotional and categorical cues. As such, emotional expressions as category cues lack the same sophistication that Scarantino describes for nonverbal illocution more generally.

Conclusion

Thus, although nonverbal "speech acts" pale in comparison to the precision offered by language, they provide sufficient informational richness to amply justify the parallels that Scarantino envisions in TAP. We therefore join him in his call for further elaboration of how pragmatic contributions via emotional expressions (and potentially other nonemotional nonverbal behaviors) might constitute meaningful signals and actions with communicative force. Here, we have briefly illustrated one potential extension, conveniently bridged by emotional

expressions, that arguably does just that: the communication of social group membership.

Overall, TAP provides a useful framework for understanding how facial expressions of emotion can convey ambiguous social group memberships. Based on our research and that of others only scantly touched earlier in this commentary, we agree with Scarantino that emotional expressions indeed provide information about more than just emotional states. They may, in some instances, represent complete communicative signals (as Scarantino has shown) and can help to convey or clarify the social groups to which an individual may belong. Facial expressions of emotion therefore function as Speech Act Analogs not only to emotion-relevant but also to group-related verbal expressions of one's desires, one's intentions, and one's status in the social world.

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