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Why do highly visible people appear more important? Affect mediates visual fluency effects in impression formation

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HIGHLIGHTS

- More visible people were perceived as more influential and likeable.
- Impressions were more positive in positive mood, and more negative in negative mood.
- Positive mood increased, and negative mood reduced visual fluency effects.
- Mediational analyses confirmed that moods produced different processing strategies.
- Processing differences were responsible for increasing or reducing visual fluency effects.

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ABSTRACT

People who are highly visible may be perceived as also more important and influential. Can good or bad moods influence the extent to which people rely on such irrelevant visual fluency cues when forming impressions? Based on recent work on affect and cognition, two experiments predicted and found that positive affect increased, and negative affect eliminated the effects of visual fluency on impressions. In Experiment 1, after an autobiographical mood induction participants read about two people whose visual fluency was factorially manipulated by changing the size and color of their photos. Both mood and visual fluency influenced impressions, and there was a significant mood by visibility interaction such that positive affect increased, and negative affect eliminated the effects of visual fluency. Experiment 2 replicated these results with a different mood induction, and also found that mood-induced differences in information processing style mediated these effects. The relevance of these findings for impression formation in everyday situations is considered, and their implications for recent affect–cognition theories are discussed.

Introduction

You are witnessing two people having an argument — one is highly visible under the streetlights, and the other one you can barely see in the shadows. Does differential visibility influence the way we form impressions? In fact, visibility matters a great deal. Highly visually salient people may be processed more fluently and are perceived to be more important and influential than are their less visible partners (Taylor & Fiske, 1975). These experiments were the first to investigate the possibility that positive mood may increase, and negative mood may reduce reliance on visual fluency cues in impression formation.

Fluency effects in impression formation

Forming accurate impressions of others is a critically important process in our personal and working lives. However, impression formation is a highly generative task where a perceiver's constructive processes have a major biasing influence of what is perceived (Asch, 1946; Heider, 1958; Jones, 1990). Fluency effects are a prime example of a constructive cognitive bias where incidental perceptual cues (such as high or low visibility influencing ease of processing) impact on impressions formed about the internal, inferred characteristics of people (such as their power, likeability and personality; Forgas & Laham, 2009).

In an early experiment, Taylor and Fiske (1975) showed that people who were easier to see (facing an observer) were judged as more influential in an interaction than their less visible partners. In a similar way, observers judge the person sitting in a well-illuminated position as more important than their partner sitting in the shadows (McArthur & Post, 1977), and even the loudness of a person's voice can produce such effects in impression formation (Robinson & McArthur, 1982).

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These findings were initially interpreted in terms of a 'salience' effect in impression formation; however, what is 'salient' and why has turned out to be notoriously difficult to define objectively (Gilbert & Malone, 1995)? In cognitive psychology salience refers to situations where a stimulus 'pops out' and calls attention to itself. In contrast, fluency effects imply a different mechanism, when processing is experienced as fluent and easy (Alter & Oppenheimer, 2009). In the light of later research, it is likely that the effects demonstrated by Taylor and Fiske (1975) and others were due to the greater cognitive fluency produced by the more visible targets, as more visible stimuli improve the subjective ease of processing and influence resulting impressions (Unkelbach & Greifeneder, 2013). If these visibility effects were due to increased fluency, we would expect that mood-induced differences in information processing style should mediate the visibility effect.

Fluency effects on judgments have been found in a number of domains other than impression formation (Unkelbach, 2006). Easy to process or fluent information is more likely to be interpreted as true, valid, likeable, causal and important. In contrast, disfluent information is more likely to be discounted as less true, likeable and valid (Begg, Anas, & Farinacci, 1992; Reber & Schwarz, 1999). Numerous cues can elicit cognitive fluency effects, including perceptual visibility, frequency of exposure, or the cognitive complexity of the material (Alter & Oppenheimer, 2009; Oppenheimer, 2008; Unkelbach & Greifeneder, 2013). It is visual fluency that will be manipulated here by showing judges photos of target persons that will vary in size as well as color.

Despite clear evidence for fluency effects on social judgments, their boundary conditions remain poorly understood. It seems that people can readily discount fluency cues if they "explicitly or implicitly recognize that it stems from an irrelevant source" (Alter & Oppenheimer, 2009, pp. 231). More attentive and elaborate processing can also eliminate subconscious fluency effects (Hawkins, Hoch, & Meyers Levy, 2001; Hendrick & Costantini, 1970). Thus, fluency effects are most likely to occur when rapid, automatic and constructive processing is employed, but decrease when processing is more attentive and elaborate (Koch & Forgas, 2012).

These experiments will explore the possibility that everyday moods may mediate visual fluency effects on impression formation. As negative moods typically recruit a more accommodative and externally focused cognitive style (Bless & Fiedler, 2006), it is predicted that positive mood should increase, and negative mood decrease the incidence of visual fluency effects, due to the different information processing strategies these mood states recruit (Bless & Fiedler, 2006; Forgas, 2002, 2007; Schwarz, 1990).

Affect and social judgments

Affect is a critical part of how people experience the world, a fact long recognized by philosophers, artists and laypeople. Surprisingly, affective influences on impression formation received less than adequate attention. It is the influence of moods that will be of interest here, defined as low-intensity, diffuse and relatively enduring affective states without a salient antecedent cause and therefore little conscious cognitive content (Forgas, 2006, 2013). Moods have two major effects on cognition and judgments: (1) mood congruence effects (influencing the valence of judgments), and (2) processing effects (influencing the process of cognition; Forgas, 2011, 2013; Forgas & Eich, 2013; Schwarz, 1990).

Mood congruence

Moods may either be directly used as information when inferring a judgment (Schwarz, 1990), or may indirectly prime related mood-congruent information to be used in social judgments (Bower, 1981; Forgas, 1995, 2011). Overall, positive mood should promote more positive evaluations, and negative mood should prime more negative impressions, producing a mood-congruent bias in judgments (Forgas, 1995; Forgas & Bower, 1987; Forgas & Eich, 2013; Schwarz, 1990). Accordingly, a mood congruent main effect on impressions was predicted for both high and low visibility targets (Fiedler, 2001; Forgas, 2002; Sedikides, 1995).

Processing effects

Moods may also influence how information is processed (Clark & Isen, 1982; Schwarz, 1990). According to recent integrative theories, positive moods promote more assimilative, heuristic and top-down processing style, while negative moods recruit more accommodative, externally focused and bottom-up processing, consistent with the adaptive signaling functions of these mood states (Bless, 2001; Bless & Fiedler, 2006; Fiedler, 2001; Ruder & Bless, 2003).

There is growing support for such a processing dichotomy, showing that negative mood triggers more accommodative thinking and the more elaborate processing of stimulus information, resulting in better memory, fewer eyewitness distortions, reduced judgmental errors, and improved ability to detect deception (Bless, 2001; Fiedler, 2001; Forgas, 2007, 2011, 2013; Forgas & East, 2008; Forgas, Vargas, & Laham, 2005). In a memory task, happy participants are consistently more likely to rely on the ease of retrieval heuristic, whereas sad participants are more likely to recall the activated content (Ruder & Bless, 2003). More accommodative processing when in negative mood may also reduce reliance on pre-existing knowledge such as stereotypes (Bodenhausen, 1993), and sad individuals also tend to pay greater attention to specific, individuating information when forming impressions (Bless, 2001).

The present experiments

Extrapolating from this literature, it is predicted that positive mood and assimilative thinking should promote, and negative mood should reduce visual fluency effects on impressions (Forgas, 2011, 2013; Hendrick & Costantini, 1970; Koch & Forgas, 2012). Specifically, (1) impressions should be more positive in a positive mood and more negative in a negative mood (mood congruency effect). Further, (2) the visual fluency (size, color) of the target person should produce a significant fluency effect, with more visible targets perceived as more influential and likeable. Of greatest theoretical interest is the predicted interaction between mood and visual fluency, such that (3) fluency effects should be increased by positive mood, and reduced by negative mood, consistent with the accommodative vs. assimilative processing styles promoted by these two mood states. Experiment 1 was an initial exploration of these predictions.

Experiment 1

Method

Overview, participants and mood induction

Participants performed two consecutive tasks, described as two unrelated experiments as follows: an autobiographical mood induction (reminiscing about happy, neutral, or sad prior experiences), and an impression formation task about two persons based on a 'verbatim' transcript of an argument between them. A photo of the targets was also attached and counterbalanced showing one person in a large (6×6 cm) color picture, and the other in a small (3×3 cm) black and white picture. The participants were students ($N = 246$; 82 in each mood condition) who participated in the study for course credit. The design was a 3×2 design, with mood (happy, control, sad) and the visual fluency of each partner (high, low) counterbalanced as the independent variables.