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Emotions in direct and remote social interaction: Getting through the spaces between us

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Abstract

If emotions are oriented to other people's actions and reactions, then their expression will be affected by available modes of access to interpersonal feedback. This theoretical review paper applies such a relation-alignment perspective to emotions experienced in co-present and remote interpersonal interactions. The role of actual, anticipated, and imagined responses of others in emotion maintenance and adjustment is highlighted. In particular, it is argued that different modes of interpersonal contact afford different styles of emotion presentation, and encourage distinctive varieties of emotional creativity. Thus, although emotion may take different forms in social arrangements distributed through a virtual world, this need not result in more limited forms of interpersonal contact.
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1. Introduction

What difference does it make to social interaction if the other person is at the end of a phone line, email connection, or video link, rather than physically present? Do we get through to them in the same way in every case or does a distinctive communication style develop around each particular mode of contact? Are some media simply better than others for certain kinds of collaboration or competition? What about our emotions? Are they too affected by the channels used for sending and receiving them, and for calibrating their presentation with other people's responses?

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This paper addresses these questions by extending Parkinson, Fischer, and Manstead's (2005) relation-alignment perspective, which formulates emotions as modes of engagement with the social (and practical) world. The article is mainly theoretical in content, but also provides illustrative data (some of it unpublished) to clarify the arguments that are developed. Its underlying assumption is that many of our emotions are intrinsically attuned to the actual, anticipated, or imagined reactions of others. For example, ''anger'' serves to draw others' attention to forces that obstruct ongoing action, and will therefore tend to persist or intensify until its function is fulfilled (or until competing processes overwhelm it). The course of anger episodes therefore depend on the dynamic availability of different kinds of interpersonal feedback (e.g., Parkinson, 2001).

Real-time face-to-face anger encourages direct nonverbal adjustment (backing off, supplicating) and may serve its purposes before it is ever reflectively characterised as an instance of this particular emotion. By contrast, anger expressed by email needs to be formulated more explicitly as an instance of this emotion (by sender or receiver), with all its associated conventional meanings and consequences. It becomes a means of communicating other-blame appraisals, whose interpersonal consequences are anticipated on the basis of socialised anger scripts rather than directly fed back. Because of the temporal and physical remoteness of the other, context-based interpretations may become miscalibrated and ineffective. However, the explicit availability of shared and negotiable emotion scripts in these mediated interactions may also afford more flexibility and emotional creativity.

Although different communication media constrain some of the options for emotion presentation, they do not dictate the nature of the interaction style adopted, nor do they impose particular manners of emoting on their users. Instead, people are capable of exploiting the different possibilities offered by available channels when within the articulated mode of emotion presentation, and of selectively deploying the various tools that are available to them in different contexts. Although some messages may be easier to transmit via certain kinds of channel, information loss always also opens options for selective emphasis or concealment. Indeed, communicative media that are low in so-called social cues or presence (e.g., Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976) may afford more flexibility in emotion presentation and allow creative deployment of communicative resources.

This paper is structured as follows: the first section provides the theoretical background to the arguments presented here, and uses the example of anger to illustrate how emotions are more generally attuned to their dynamic effects on others with whom we are interacting. The second section focuses on the effects of different communication media and modes of interpersonal contact on the process of relation alignment. Examples are presented of how constraints in informational access to another person (e.g., absence of communication channels, physical distance, temporal resolution) impact on the styles and outcomes of emotional engagement. In the third section, the paper raises the possibility that users may learn to counteract some of the limitations of communication media under certain circumstances. For instance, sophisticated email users know when to supplement their text with annotations such as emoticons in order to avert potential misinterpretations of informal text. The fourth section suggests that people may sometimes exploit constraints in communication channels in an interaction, and that there are advantages as well as disadvantages to using media that are less information-rich. For example, Walther has argued that internet chat may afford hyperpersonal communication in certain interpersonal relationships, partly because attention can be devoted to composing and interpreting the