



Intrapersonal variability in interpersonal perception in romantic relationships: Biases and accuracy



Gentiana Sadikaj*, D.S. Moskowitz, David C. Zuroff

Department of Psychology, McGill University, 1205 Dr. Penfield Avenue, Montreal, QC H3A 1B1, Canada

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 1 October 2015

Revised 19 April 2016

Accepted 4 June 2016

Available online 8 June 2016

Keywords:

Interpersonal perception
Intrapersonal variability
Accuracy and bias
Close relationships
Event-contingent recording method

ABSTRACT

We examined whether intrapersonal variability in the perception of partner's behavior, *perception spin*, was related to partner's intrapersonal variability in behavior, *behavioral spin*, and was associated with biases in the perception of negative affect. Ninety-three cohabiting couples reported their perceptions of partner's affect and partner's communal and agentic behavior in interactions with each other for 20 days. Perception spin was calculated as the within-person standard deviation of perception scores across interactions. Spin in the perception of the partner was associated with the partner's behavioral spin. Participants with higher perception spin overestimated their partner's negative affect and more strongly assumed that their partner's affect was similar to their own negative affect. Thus, perception spin is an individual difference variable that reflects in part the extent of variability in the partner's behavior, but higher spin also indicates distortions in perceptions of others.

© 2016 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Variability in the perception of others' interpersonal behavior reflects changes in the interpersonal behavior of the same target person across different interpersonal situations and differences across different target persons' interpersonal behavior in the same situation. Variability in perception is also related to the perceiver's sensitivity and motivation to detect and utilize valid cues indicating changes in others' behaviors (Funder, 1995). Notwithstanding this variability, interpersonal perception of others' behavior should be partly determined by the extent of true changes in the target person's behavior and real differences across different target persons' behavior. Given that an accurate understanding of others is an indicator of psychological adjustment and a promoter of adaptive interpersonal functioning (Hall & Andrzejewski, 2008), it follows that intrapersonal variability in interpersonal perception of others' behavior that is unaccounted for by these true changes and differences in others' behavior would be associated both with psychological and interpersonal dysfunction. However, little is known empirically about individual differences in intrapersonal variability in perception of others' interpersonal behavior. Methodological difficulties, including the measurement of a person's perception in a large number of interpersonal situations with the same other, may account for the dearth of empirical

findings concerning intrapersonal variability in interpersonal perception of others' behavior. Using an event-contingent recording methodology (ECR; Moskowitz & Sadikaj, 2011) with a sample of cohabiting couples, the present study sought to fill this gap by exploring the following questions with regards to intrapersonal variability in perception of a romantic partner's interpersonal behavior. First, is intrapersonal variability in perception of the romantic partner's interpersonal behavior related to the romantic partner's intrapersonal variability in behavior? Second, is intrapersonal variability in perception of others' behavior a feature of the perceiver's perceptual style, independent of other features of this style such as the tendency to perceive others in a consistent manner, that generalizes across perception of (a) various target others and (b) various characteristics of target others?

1.1. Defining intrapersonal variability in interpersonal perception

One form of intrapersonal variability in perception of a target person's behavior, referred to in the present research as *perception spin*, characterizes the dispersion of a person's perception around the person's typical (i.e., mean) interpersonal perception of a target person across situations. In the present research, interpersonal perception was defined along the interpersonal circumplex dimensions of agency and communion. According to this model, interpersonal variables including perception and behavior can be defined using the interpersonal circle demarcated by the two orthogonal dimensions of agency and communion (Wiggins,

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: gentiana.sadikaj@mail.mcgill.ca (G. Sadikaj).

1991). Communion, ranging from warm-agreeable to cold-quarrelsome, refers to strivings to foster social ties with others. Agency, varying from assertive-dominant to unassertive-submissive, refers to strivings for mastery, power, and a sense of differentiation from others. A behavior that is perceived as warm and agreeable indicates affection and acceptance from the other, while a behavior that is perceived as cold and quarrelsome signifies hostility and rejection from the other. A behavior that is perceived as assertive and dominant indicates the other's attempt to exert power over and differentiate oneself from the person, whereas a behavior that is perceived as unassertive and submissive indicates the other's self-abasement and deference to the person.

As defined within the circumplex models of behavior, many interpersonal behaviors represent a blend of communion and agency. Similarly, interpersonal perception is defined to capture the mixture of communion and agency in the perceived behavior. In the present research intrapersonal variability in interpersonal perception was defined to reflect various combinations of the dimensions of perceived communion and perceived agency. Perception spin characterizes the extent to which a person's perception of a target person's interpersonal behavioral fluctuates around the interpersonal circle across interpersonal situations.

1.2. What contributes to intrapersonal variability in interpersonal perception of the romantic partner's interpersonal behavior?

Perception of the romantic partner may be especially important because of the central influence of this relationship for the individual's health and adjustment (Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001; Proulx, Helms, & Buehler, 2007). Consistent with models of interpersonal perception (Fletcher & Kerr, 2010; Gagné & Lydon, 2004; West & Kenny, 2011), we assume that perception scores contain true variance, which is accounted for by the partner's actual behavior, and variance that is related to perceptual biases. Research findings suggest that intrapersonal variability in the person's perception of the partner's behavior is partially explained by changes in the partner's behavior, both positive and negative, across situations (for a meta-analysis, see Fletcher & Kerr, 2010). The link between intrapersonal variability in perception and changes in the partner's behavior is the outcome of the person's accuracy in tracking changes in the partner's behavior (i.e., tracking accuracy; West & Kenny, 2011). Biases that may account for intrapersonal variability in perception include mean-level bias (i.e., overestimation or underestimation of the level of the partner's behavior; Fletcher & Kerr, 2010; Overall, Fletcher, & Kenny, 2012; Overall & Hammond, 2013), bias of assumed similarity (i.e., the person's reliance on their own behavior as a heuristic for making judgements about the partner's behavior; Kenny & Acitelli, 2001), and bias of perseveration (i.e., the influence of the person's prior perception of the partner's behavior on subsequent perception of the partner's behavior; Fletcher & Kerr, 2010; West & Kenny, 2011). Recent meta-analytical findings have documented partners' tendencies to overestimate each other's negative behavior, but underestimate one another's positive behavior (Fletcher & Kerr, 2010). Other research supports the tendency of individuals to rely on their awareness of their own behavior as a heuristic for making judgments about their partner's behavior (Kenny & Acitelli, 2001; Sadikaj, Moskowitz, & Zuroff, 2015a; Schul & Vinokur, 2000). Theorists have argued that perception accuracy and biases can operate independently from each other with evidence suggesting that this might be the case for accuracy and mean-level bias (Fletcher & Kerr, 2010). Because different kinds of biases do not necessarily pull the person's perception in the same direction as the partner's behavior does, various biases contribute to enhance intrapersonal variability in the perception of the partner's behavior.

Personality characteristics associated with difficulties with emotion regulation may moderate perceptions of the partner's behavior, in particular, partner's negative behavior. These characteristics may contribute to lower the threshold (i.e., higher sensitivity) for perceiving negative behavior in others, enhance vigilance for tracking such behavior in others, and foster an indiscriminate use of one's own negative behavior as a heuristic for judging others' negative behavior. Together, higher sensitivity and vigilance to perceiving negative behavior by the partner may lead to higher perception spin by enhancing the contribution of accuracy, biases, or both to perception scores. Research evidence documents patterns of perception among individuals with difficulties in emotion regulation that would provide support for this expectation. Individuals higher on attachment anxiety and depressive symptoms and lower in self-esteem demonstrate higher tracking accuracy for their partner's negative behavior (Murray, Bellavia, Rose, & Griffin, 2003; Overall & Hammond, 2013; Sadikaj et al., 2015a; Simpson, Ickes, & Grich, 1999). Overestimation of the partner's overall negative behavior and negative affect has been found among individuals with higher depressive symptoms and higher attachment avoidance (Overall & Hammond, 2013; Overall, Simpson, Fletcher, & Fillo, 2015), whereas higher bias of assumed similarity for the partner's quarrelsome behavior has been documented among individuals with higher intrapersonal variability in negative affect (Sadikaj et al., 2015a). These findings are in line with clinical evidence, which suggests that individuals with Borderline Personality Disorder, characterized by disturbed patterns of interpersonal relationships, vacillate between idealizing and devaluing others (American Psychiatric Associations, 2013; Westen, 1991); such vacillations would contribute to large intrapersonal variability in perception of others' interpersonal behavior.

1.3. Perception spin and accuracy and bias of perception of the partner's negative affect

As previously noted, some of the variance in perception reflects actual variability in the target person's behavior. When we control for the true variance in perception of behavior, the remaining variance in variability likely reflects perceptual biases. Some models suggest that these perceptual biases may have an adaptive value in romantic relationships, in particular when relationship-threatening perceptions are invoked (Fletcher & Kerr, 2010; Gagné & Lydon, 2004; Ickes & Simpson, 1997). Notwithstanding this function of perceptual biases, it is likely that the remaining (residual) variance in variability accounted for by these perceptual biases reflects maladaptive features of the person related to problematical relational processes. Greater residual variability in perception of behavior may indicate proneness towards biased perceptions across a variety of perception domains including perception of partner's affect. Individual differences that contribute to increase biases in the perception of the partner's behavior may also lead to increased biases in the perception of the partner's negative affect.

1.4. Overview of the present study

We used an event-contingent recording (ECR) methodology with a sample of cohabiting couples to investigate sources of intrapersonal variability in the perception of the romantic partner's interpersonal behavior. The ECR method permitted us to estimate the intrapersonal variability in the perception of the partner's interpersonal behavior (i.e., perception spin) and examine: (1) the contribution of the partner's intrapersonal variability in behavior, *behavioral spin*, to the person's perception spin, (2) the perceiver's contribution to perception spin, and (3) the relation

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5046233>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/5046233>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)