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Winners are grinners: Expressing authentic positive emotion enhances status in performance contexts[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Research has shown that people who express positive emotion following victory risk appearing unlikeable and inconsiderate. We investigated whether these relational costs might be offset by status benefits, and the processes underlying such benefits. Across eight experiments ($N = 1456$), we found that winners who expressed positive emotion were perceived as higher in social standing than winners who suppressed positive emotion. To understand the mechanisms underlying this effect, we manipulated factors to do with the *situation* in which emotion was expressed, the type of *person* expressing emotion, and the *way* emotion was expressed. We also conducted replications of these experiments. The only factor that consistently moderated the expressivity effect was perceived authenticity, such that expressive winners only gained status benefits when observers believed the emotion expression was authentic. The findings point to the power of context in shaping the nature of the social benefits reaped by expressing positive emotion.

1. Introduction

It feels good to win. Triumphant in this way inspires a range of positive feelings from elation and excitement, to pride and pleasure, and even gratitude and geniality. Yet, people do not only *feel* positive emotion when they win; they also tend to express that emotion. While this expression is partly the natural outgrowth of feeling strong emotion (emotion experience and expression are moderately correlated; Gross, John, & Richards, 2000), it also serves a distinct social purpose of signalling one's feelings to others. Thus, the expression of positive emotion in competitive, and other, situations communicates information to others about how a person feels, what they are like, and how they are likely to act.

This socio-functional perspective on emotion posits that emotion expression helps people navigate their social world, serving dual functions of maintaining social relationships (affiliation) and position in a social hierarchy (status; Fischer & Manstead, 2008; Keltner & Haidt, 1999). People use emotions as social information, inferring beyond feeling states (e.g., she is angry) to logical psychological and behavioral outcomes of that feeling state (e.g., she intends to take revenge; Van Kleef, 2009). Moreover, when making person perception judgments, people use others' emotion expressions (e.g., she is smiling) to make

dispositional attributions about their character (e.g., she is self-confident; Hareli & Hess, 2010). Thus, when people express positive emotion following a win, it feeds into the impression that others form. Understanding the nature of this impression is the main goal of the present research.

Expressing positive emotion is typically considered an affiliative signal—one designed to project warmth and a desire to cooperate (Harker & Keltner, 2001; Shiota, Campos, Keltner, & Hertenstein, 2004). Yet, expressing positive emotion does not always make one appear friendly and likeable. Indeed, in performance contexts, winners who express positive emotion are perceived as less affiliative and less likeable than winners who remain relatively inexpressive (Kalokerinos, Greenaway, Pedder, & Margetts, 2014). This is partly due to the impression that these winners are acting in a manner that is inconsiderate to the feelings of others around them (Kalokerinos et al., 2014). This suggests that winners may benefit from regulating the expression of positive emotion in performance contexts, to avoid giving an impression of inconsiderateness. Possibly mindful of this impression, winners often spontaneously regulate their emotions to inhibit the expression of positive emotion when in the presence of losers (Friedman & Miller-Herringer, 1991; Schall, Martiny, Goetz, & Hall, 2016). This appears to be a rare situation in which people actually reap social

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benefits from *suppressing* the expression of positive emotion—an emotion regulation strategy most typically shown to damage social relations (Butler et al., 2003; Greenaway & Kalokerinos, 2017).

If expressing positive emotion following a win does not signal social affiliation, we argue that it may instead signal social standing (i.e., perceptions of one's place in a social hierarchy). Such a possibility builds on research that suggests a hydraulic link between judgements of warmth—which signals affiliation—and competence—which signals status (Judd, James-Hawkins, Yzerbyt, & Kashima, 2005). Thus, if winners are not attributed affiliative motives for expressing positive emotion, they may instead be attributed high status. We make this argument based on our reading of two bodies of literature: work on discrete emotions and social perception.

Turning first to the literature on discrete emotions, research has shown that the expression of specific emotions, particularly pride, acts to signal high status. For example, Shariff and Tracy (2009) found that expressions of pride were associated implicitly with perceptions of high social status compared with expressions of shame, embarrassment, anger, disgust, fear, or happiness. Pride is an emotion commonly expressed following victory (Tracy & Matsumoto, 2008), but it is not the only positive emotion that winners express. For example, winners commonly spontaneously exhibit facial expressions indicative of happiness and joy (Fernandez-Dols & Ruiz-Belda, 1995; Matsumoto & Willingham, 2006). These emotions are typically thought to signal affiliation rather than status, and thus represent a strong test of the link between positive emotion expression and perceived social standing. In the interests of assessing ecologically valid expressions that represent a range of positive emotions, beyond pride, we sourced dynamic videos featuring spontaneous reactions from winners of field and lab-based competitions. We used these general positive emotion expressions to assess the impression formed of these winners by neutral observers who took no part in the competition.

The social perception literature also provides hints that positive emotion expression can create an impression of high status. People commonly infer information about people's status based on how they present themselves. This is because, absent other information about a person, that person's assessment of themselves provides diagnostic information about what they are like. This is the logic underlying the concept of reverse appraisals, in which a person's emotion expression is taken as indicating something about that person's character, traits, or skills (Hareli & Hess, 2010). For example, research shows that other people's confidence is used by naïve observers to assess that person's abilities (Murphy et al., 2015; Murphy, Barlow, & von Hippel, 2017) and that expressed confidence is associated with higher perceived status (Anderson, Brion, Moore, & Kennedy, 2012). People who feel positive emotion are more confident of their own future success (George, 2000). Thus, to the extent that positive emotion and confidence are linked in observers' minds, seeing someone express positive emotion may create the impression that they feel confident about future success, which in turn might shape observers' perceptions of that person's actual ability.

Considered from another angle, expressing positive emotion in competitive contexts may signal more than the fact that one is happy with their own performance, or feels confident about future success. It may also signal that the win itself was of high value—that it is an important win worth celebrating—which provides observers with a guide for how much status to attribute the winner. That is, if people assume a winner's expressive reaction is diagnostic of how valuable the win is, observers should be more inclined to attribute higher status and ability to expressive than non-expressive winners. Drawing on these suggestive lines of inquiry, we predicted overall that winners who express positive emotion will create an impression of high social standing relative to winners who suppress positive emotion.

Astute readers will note that we have used multiple terms to refer to social standing, including status, confidence, success, and ability. In our early thinking on this project, we conceptualized these as fairly interchangeable indicators of social standing, broadly construed. This is

reinforced somewhat by the definition put forward by Anderson, Hildreth, and Howland (2015), who argue that status comprises three major components. First, it involves respect and admiration, such that others hold an individual in high esteem. Second, it involves voluntary deference, such that others choose to comply with an individual's requests. Third, it involves perceived instrumental value, such that an individual is perceived as capable of achieving personal goals. In the present research, we assessed a constellation of measures that tapped into these different aspects of social standing: respect and admiration (i.e., perceived prestige, perceived authenticity; Henrich & Gil-White, 2001; Liu & Perrewé, 2006), voluntary deference (i.e., perceived influence; Berger, Cohen, & Zelditch, 1972), and instrumental value (i.e., perceived competence, success, and future performance; Anderson et al., 2015).

To these, we added measures suggested by other perspectives on social standing. Specifically, we assessed perceptions of winner dominance, which some scholars consider a pathway to status that is distinct from prestige due to its element of coercion (Cheng, Tracy, Foulsham, Kingstone, & Henrich, 2013). We also assessed perceptions of winner charisma, which is a factor linked with status and positive emotion expression in theories of leadership (Bono & Ilies, 2006).

We made no concrete predictions about which form of social standing would be attributed to winners who expressed positive emotion. That is, we were interested in an exploratory way to discover which sort of “flavor” of social standing people attributed winners who expressed positive emotion. We thought it plausible that this might take the form of intimidation (i.e., greater perceived dominance) and influence (i.e., greater perceived status and prestige) and aptitude (i.e., greater perceived competence and success). In evaluating these constructs, we take a multivariate approach that assesses general patterns of perceptions across the set of measures to test for a general increase in social standing, broadly construed. We followed this up with inspection of the effects on individual measures where appropriate.

We further sought to uncover specific processes through which positive emotion expression may increase perceived social standing following a win. Here again, we took inspiration from the reverse appraisal perspective on person perception, which theorizes that observers reconstruct the emotional appraisals they believe underpin an emotional reaction. That is, observers use a target's emotional expression to infer how the target sees the situation. They then use these “reverse appraisals” to make judgments of the target (Hareli & Hess, 2010). Research has shown that perceivers spontaneously make reverse appraisals from even limited emotion expression information (e.g. de Melo, Carnevale, Read, & Gratch, 2013).

In our experiments, we aim to understand the appraisals made by perceivers in judging social standing from target emotion expression. To test these mechanisms, we took an experimental approach that manipulated the proposed mediator (or a proximal contextual correlate) in order to identify conditions under which the link between positive emotion and social standing is broken (Spencer, Zanna, & Fong, 2005). We tested three different process variables that we hypothesized might be key to the kinds of reverse appraisals made by our participants. The studies are presented in the order we conceived of these potential explanations, and the paper thus reflects the way our thinking unfolded over time. We note, of course, that the three candidate processes we tested do not represent an exhaustive list, and there are likely multiple appraisal processes at work.

The first process variable we tested was assessed by manipulating the nature of the *audience* of the positive emotion expression. If perceived inconsiderateness is a core process through which positive emotion expression increases social standing (Kalokerinos et al., 2014), we would expect this link to operate only when winners are described as expressing positive emotion in the presence of losers, not when they are described as expressing positive emotion in front of uninvolved observers. We tested this possibility by manipulating winner audience in Experiment 3.

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