Mood effects on ingratiation: Affective influences on producing and responding to ingratiating messages

Diana Matovic, Joseph P. Forgas[*],[1]

University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Can mood influence the way people produce and respond to ingratiating messages? Based on recent affect-cognition theories we demonstrate for the first time that mild negative mood increased communicators' use of ingratiatory tactics such as flattery, conformity and self-promotion (Exp. 1). Experiment 2 further confirmed that ingratiatory messages written in a negative mood were more effective and resulted in more positive interpersonal evaluations than messages written in a positive mood. Experiment 3 found that negative mood also improved recipients' willingness to accept realistic ingratiation. An analysis of response latencies (Exps. 1 and 3) and recall (Exp. 3), and mediational analyses showed that these effects were consistent with negative mood promoting longer and more attentive processing by both senders and recipients. The theoretical implications of these results for recent affect-cognition theories are considered, and the practical implications of these findings for everyday strategic communication and interpersonal behavior are discussed.

Humans are an intensely social species, and we use language as the primary means of establishing and maintaining positive relationships with others (Dunbar, 1996). Much social communication is designed to promote cohesion and to create and maintain positive impressions to achieve our strategic objectives (E. E. Jones, 1964). Social philosophers such as Machiavelli (1532/1961) recognized almost five hundred years ago that ingratiation is a highly effective strategy for accumulating and maintaining interpersonal influence and power.

1. Strategic communication and ingratiation

Classic work on ingratiation by E. E. Jones (1964) showed that there are four major strategies that ingratiators use to create positive impressions, including (1) *other-enhancement*, or flattery, (2) *conformity* in opinion and behavior, (3) *self-enhancement*, and (4) *rendering favors*. There is considerable evidence supporting E. E. Jones' (1964) model of ingratiation showing that ingratiation is an effective strategy even when the ingratiator's ulterior motives are quite obvious. For instance, restaurant customers tip more after receiving flattery (Seiter, 2007), and interviewees who use self-promotion are more likely to get a job (Proost, Schreurs, De Witte, & Derous, 2010).

Surprisingly, even though affect is a fundamental dimension of interpersonal behavior (Zajonc, 1981), the influence of affective states on the way people produce, and respond to ingratiation has not been studied before. Both constructing and interpreting ingratiation are highly elaborate social cognitive tasks (E. E. Jones, 1964), and thus there is good reason to assume that moods should play a significant role in how these tasks are performed (Forgas, 1995; Forgas & Eich, 2013). The absence of prior work on affect and ingratiation is all the more surprising given accumulating evidence for mood-induced processing differences in interpersonal behavior (Bodenhausen, Kramer, & Susser, 1994; Forgas, 1999, 2007, 2011a). This paper reports three experiments that demonstrate, for the first time, that negative affect can *improve* both the production (Exps. 1, 2), and the reception (Exp. 3) of ingratiating communications, consistent with recent evidence for the information processing consequences of mood states (Forgas, 2013).

The likelihood of a bidirectional link between ingratiation and affect is also suggested by prior work showing that both producing and receiving ingratiating messages can influence *subsequent* mood. For example, Dunn, Biesanz, Human, and Finn (2007) found that people engaging in self-promotion also feel more positively themselves. Further, Vonk (2002) found that recipients' mood was improved when they were the target of flattery and conformity. We explore a complementary effect here, the influence of *antecedent* moods on subsequent ingratiation.

We hypothesize that negative mood should promote a more attentive and externally oriented information processing style compared to neutral mood (Bless & Fiedler, 2006). Such increased attention and

---

external focus on one's partner and on communicative norms while composing an ingratiatory message should improve the effectiveness of ingratiating communication (Schlenker & Leary, 1982). The role of more attentive processing in effective ingratiation is also suggested by Leary and Kowalski's (1990) model of impression management, stating that effective ingratiation requires the careful consideration of external factors such as role constraints and target features.

Consistent with this view, successful ingratiators need to engage in attentive processing in order to carefully tailor their messages to the demands of the situation (Baumeister, 1982; R. G. Jones & Jones, 1964), and consider the context, their role and the relevance of the issue to the recipient (E. E. Jones, Gergen, & Jones, 1963). Even strategies such as self-enhancement – communicating about the self - must be sensitive to external factors such as ingratiators' target audience - accordingly, self-enhancement is more likely to be used with strangers than friends (Tice, Butler, Muraven, & Stillwell, 1995). Thus, a more attentive and externally oriented and accommodative processing style promoted by a negative mood (Bless & Fiedler, 2006) is predicted to enhance communicators' ingratiation effectiveness compared to neutral and positive mood. Negative mood should also enhance the effectiveness of *received* ingratiation, as more accommodative processing increases attention to the details of incoming messages (Bless & Fiedler, 2006). The processing benefits of mild dysphoria in promoting accommodative processing apply to many kinds of social cognitive tasks where attention to external details is beneficial (Forgas & Eich, 2013).In contrast, positive mood participants are expected to be less effective in producing, and less influenced by received ingratiation due to their less attentive, and more assimilative processing style (Bless & Fiedler, 2006).

2. Affect and strategic communication

Affect can exert a subtle but important influence on social behaviors by influencing the information processing strategies people employ (Forgas & Eich, 2013). Specifically, several lines of evidence indicate that negative moods can trigger a more detailed and attentive processing style, a pattern broadly consistent with Clark and Isen's (1982) mood maintenance/mood repair hypothesis, Forster and Dannenberg's (2010) global-local processing model, Fredrickson's (2001) broaden-and-build theory, and Schwarz's (1990) cognitive tuning model.

The processing effects of moods have recently been integrated in the *assimilative-accommodative* model proposed by Bless and Fiedler (2006). This model suggests that moods perform an important evolutionary signaling function, such that positive mood, signaling a safe and familiar situation, promotes a more assimilative, top-down, and internally focused processing style. In contrast, negative mood functions as a mild alarm signal, and recruits more accommodative and bottom-up processing, increasing attention to external stimulus information. A growing number of recent experiments support these predictions. For example, negative mood improved attention to Gricean communication norms and helped the detection of linguistic ambiguity in messages (Koch, Forgas, & Matovic, 2013; Matovic, Koch, & Forgas, 2014), reduced the incidence of various judgmental errors (Forgas, 2011b, 2011c), improved social memory (Forgas, Goldenberg, & Unkelbach, 2009), and produced more effective persuasive arguments (Forgas, 2007).

In turn, assimilative thinking produced by positive mood (Bless & Fiedler, 2006) results in greater reliance on pre-existing internal scripts and schemas when forming impressions (Bless & Fiedler, 1995), and frees up cognitive resources for improved performance on a second task in a dual-task paradigm (Bless et al., 1996). Positive mood also promotes creativity, and the greater use of mental shortcuts and heuristics (Bodenhausen et al., 1994; Forgas, 2011b; Isen, Daubman, & Nowicki, 1987; Ruder & Bless, 2003). Thus, assimilative and accommodative processing induced by positive and negative mood appears to produce important dichotomous consequences for social thinking and

interpersonal behaviors.

Extrapolating from this literature, Experiments 1 and 2 predicted that negative mood should produce more successful ingratiating messages and greater use of all of E. E. Jones' (1964) ingratiation strategies. When *receiving* ingratiation in Experiment 3, negative mood should promote greater attention to ingratiatory messages, and so increase their impact. Further, both latency and memory data will be collected to index mood-induced differences in processing style (Bless & Fiedler, 2006). A mediational analysis will assess the predicted pattern of correlations between processing style and the production and interpretation of ingratiating messages.

3. Experiment 1

3.1. Method

3.1.1. Overview, design and participants

Mood effects on ingratiation were explored in a realistic 'getting to know you' exercise using a cyber interaction and e-mail messages. Participants first received background information about their 'partner', Laura. Next, they viewed positive, negative or neutral mood-inducing film clips before composing an open-ended ingratiating message to Laura. Messages were rated by two independent coders for the presence of E. E. Jones' (1964) four basic ingratiating strategies. Processing latencies (the time taken to produce a message) were also recorded. A complete debriefing concluded the experiment, indicating no awareness of the mood manipulations or hypotheses.

A power analysis indicated that to achieve 80% power for a small-medium effect ($d = 0.30$) with three mood conditions, approximately 100 participants will be required. Accordingly, participants were 100 psychology students (63 females, 37 males; $M_{age} = 19.39$, $SD_{age} = 4.66$) who received course credit for their participation. Seven participants were excluded due to poor English, technical difficulties with the computer program, or confusion about the experiment ($N_{pos} = 30$, $N_{neut} = 32$, $N_{neg} = 31$). In all three experiments described here, all data collected and removed have been fully reported.

3.1.2. Mood induction

Participants watched funny, neutral or sad 9-min film excerpts (*Borat*, a documentary about the creation of the internet, and *My Life*, respectively) to induce mood, described as part of a separate experiment (Fiedler, 2001; Forgas & Eich, 2013).

3.1.3. The ingratiation task

Participants were instructed to engage in a short online getting-to-know-you encounter, with the objective of trying to get their partner, Laura, "to like you, by presenting as positive an impression about yourself as possible". Participants were told that Laura is located in a neighboring room and will start the conversation by writing a short introductory e-mail about herself. Laura was described as either extraverted and not studious, or introverted and studious (see below). These counterbalanced descriptions were included to increase external validity, and were not expected to produce any main or interaction effects, as confirmed in subsequent analysis:

> "Hey, my name is Laura. I just started uni this semester, and I'm enjoying it so far. I'm a fairly extraverted person, who is not studious./I'm a fairly introverted person, who is studious. I'm really into working out and hanging out with my friends. I don't like cleaning or cooking. My main focus at the moment apart from uni is saving up for a trip to Europe and America. I'm hoping to go mid-year. I can't wait to travel!!
>
> Actually, maybe you could help me with this… I'm not really sure where stuff is on campus, and I need a few sheets of paper to take notes in my lecture right after this experiment. Do you know somewhere nearby where I can buy a notebook, or get a few sheets of paper? My lecture is right after this experiment… Anyway, I don't think I'm supposed to write