Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes
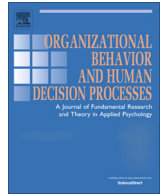
Managing perceptions of distress at work: Reframing emotion as passion

Elizabeth Baily Wolf [a,*], Jooa Julia Lee [b], Sunita Sah [c], Alison Wood Brooks [d]

[a] Harvard Business School, Cotting 300E, Soldiers Field Road, Boston, MA 02163, United States
[b] The University of Michigan, The Stephen M. Ross School of Business, 701 Tappan Ave, R4661, Ann Arbor, MI 48109, United States
[c] Cornell University, Johnson Graduate School of Management, Sage Hall 326, Ithaca, NY 14853, United States
[d] Harvard Business School, Baker Library 463, Soldiers Field Road, Boston, MA 02163, United States

A B S T R A C T

Expressing distress at work can have negative consequences for employees: observers perceive employees who express distress as less competent than employees who do not. Across five experiments, we explore how reframing a socially inappropriate emotional expression (distress) by publicly attributing it to an appropriate source (passion) can shape perceptions of, and decisions about, the person who expressed emotion. In Studies 1a-c, participants viewed individuals who reframed distress as passion as more competent than those who attributed distress to emotionality or made no attribution. In Studies 2a-b, reframing emotion as passion shifted interpersonal decision-making: participants were more likely to hire job candidates and choose collaborators who reframed their distress as passion compared to those who did not. Expresser gender did not moderate these effects. Results suggest that in cases when distress expressions cannot or should not be suppressed, reframing distress as passion can improve observers' impressions of the expresser.

© 2016 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Imagine you are working on a high-profile project with two senior colleagues whom you want to impress. In addition to a looming deadline to present the project to your clients, you also feel pressure to complete the project successfully before an upcoming performance review. In a meeting with your colleagues, you are discussing several major changes to the presentation when your computer suddenly crashes, deleting all of your recent work. You feel frustrated, disappointed, defeated, upset. You worry that expressing your distress openly will cause your colleagues to view you as incompetent, but you are unable to hide how you feel. After you express your distress, you wish you could take it back, but it is too late.

In the current work, we propose a novel strategy that individuals may use to alter observers' impressions after an expression of emotion has occurred: reframing the emotional expression. We define *emotion reframing* as the process of publicly attributing a socially inappropriate emotional expression to a socially appropriate source. In this paper, we test whether individuals can improve observers' perceptions of their competence following a display of distress by reframing their emotion as passion. In addition to

suggesting a practical strategy to help individuals in organizations, this research makes important theoretical contributions to the literatures on emotion regulation and impression management.

2. Expressions of distress

In this paper, we study distress (a construct that subsumes several negative discrete emotions), rather than studying a specific discrete negative emotion such as anxiety or sadness. We focus on distress because we are interested in observers' perceptions of emotional expressions, not individuals' experiences of their own emotions. Although individuals may be aware of the specific discrete emotions they are experiencing, expressions of these emotions often appear similar to observers. For example, an employee may cry because he feels sad, disappointed, anxious, or frustrated. All of these emotions are what we would term distress. They are characterized by negative valence, lack of control, and a need for assistance (Smith & Ellsworth, 1985; Van Kleef, De Dreu, & Manstead, 2010). Importantly, however, distress is distinct from other-directed anger. Although both anger and distress are negatively-valenced emotions, displays of anger are associated with competence and power, whereas distress is associated with incompetence and dependence (e.g., Barrett & Bliss-Moreau, 2009; Fischer, Eagly, & Oosterwijk, 2013; Tiedens, 2000, 2001; Van Kleef et al., 2010).

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: ebaily@hbs.edu (E.B. Wolf), jooalee@umich.edu (J.J. Lee), sunitasahcmu@gmail.com (S. Sah), awbrooks@hbs.edu (A.W. Brooks).

People often feel distressed at work, triggered both by negative events at work and by non-work situations that carry over into the workplace (e.g., Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Working individuals tend to feel significantly more distress during the workweek than on weekends (e.g., Stone, Schneider, & Harter, 2012), caused by events such as being assigned undesirable work, experiencing interpersonal conflict with supervisors, co-workers, or customers, being subjected to discrimination, negotiating for compensation, or receiving or delivering negative feedback (Brief & Weiss, 2002; Brooks & Schweitzer, 2011; Elfenbein, 2007; Mignonac & Herrbach, 2004; Vingerhoets, Cornelius, Van Heck, & Becht, 2000). As evidence of the pervasiveness of distress in the workplace, we asked 202 people who work full-time[1] to indicate whether they had experienced distress at work. Ninety nine percent of participants said that they had experienced distress at least once, and 54.7% indicated that they experience the emotion at least once a week. Experiencing distress predicts important work outcomes such as lower job satisfaction, decreased feelings of personal accomplishment, and increased emotional exhaustion, absenteeism, and turnover intentions (see Thoresen, Kaplan, Barsky, Warren, & de Chermont, 2003 for a meta-analysis and review).

Although people experience distress often at work, they may or may not wish to express how they feel to others. People often avoid expressing distress in professional contexts because doing so would violate workplace display rules (i.e., norms about the appropriateness of emotional expressions; Diefendorff & Greguras, 2009; Ekman & Friesen, 1969). Workplace display rules often encourage employees to express or even exaggerate positive feelings such as happiness, and to avoid expressions of distress (e.g., crying, getting choked up, appearing visibly sad, anxious, or frustrated), to please customers and maintain harmony with co-workers (e.g., Diefendorff & Richard, 2008; Grandey, 2000; Hochschild, 1983; Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987). However, although individuals may not wish to express their distress, suppressing distress is difficult, is often ineffective, and may limit effective communication about problems or conflicts (e.g., Geddes & Callister, 2007; Hofmann, Heering, Sawyer, & Asnaani, 2009).

Expressions of distress in the workplace often lead the expresser to feel embarrassed and observers to feel uncomfortable and unsure how to respond (Kennedy-Moore & Watson, 2001; Plas & Hoover-Dempsey, 1988). Observers may also draw negative conclusions about the expresser's disposition and ability to perform well at work, often inferring that the expresser is less independent and competent than before the expression (e.g., Cornelius & Labott, 2001; Frijda, 1986; Tiedens, 2000, 2001; Tiedens, Ellsworth, & Mesquita, 2000; Van Kleef et al., 2010).

3. Cognitive reappraisal

People use a variety of strategies to regulate their emotions. One pervasive and much-studied emotion regulation strategy is *cognitive reappraisal* (Gross, 1998; Gross & John, 2003). Cognitive reappraisal involves changing how one thinks about a situation to change its emotional impact (Gross, 2002). For example, an individual may reappraise a failure as a learning opportunity, leading him to feel hope instead of disappointment. One way to cognitively reappraise a negative emotion is to reappraise the arousal associated with it as a different, positive emotion (e.g., Blascovich, 2008; Crum, Salovey, & Achor, 2013; Schachter & Singer, 1962). For example, Brooks (2014) found that individuals can easily reappraise the arousal associated with pre-performance anxiety as the closely-related positive emotion, excitement. In this paper, we

investigate how the process of reappraising negative emotions as positive could operate interpersonally.

Though a large body of literature has examined how cognitive reappraisal affects the intrapsychic experience of emotions, most of these studies focus on how individuals regulate their own emotions in solitude (e.g., Zaki & Williams, 2013). Extant work that has explored the interpersonal dynamics of emotion regulation has focused on how the individual who experiences the emotion may rely on the presence of others to regulate his or her own internal feelings (e.g., by "venting;" Rimé, 2007; Zaki & Williams, 2013).

Other work has explored how observers evaluate individuals who use cognitive reappraisal to alter their own emotional experiences before an emotion is expressed (e.g., Cote, 2005; Grandey, 2003). For example, Chi, Grandey, Diamond, and Krimmel (2011) found a positive relationship between customer ratings of restaurant servers and the degree to which the servers modified their inner feelings through cognitive reappraisal (i.e., deep acting). Previous research, however, has not explored how individuals may reappraise their emotions after they have been expressed, or how they might publicly reframe their emotions to influence observers' perceptions.

4. Reframing emotional expressions

In the current work, we explore *emotion reframing*—how reframing a socially inappropriate emotional expression by publicly attributing it to an appropriate source can shape observers' perceptions. Like cognitive reappraisal, emotion reframing involves a shift from one appraisal of an emotion to another. However, whereas cognitive reappraisal is private and intrapsychic, reframing is public and interpersonal. Similar to the way cognitive reappraisal causes emotional individuals to alter the trajectory of their own emotional responses because they reinterpret the meaning of a situation, reframing causes observers to alter the trajectory of their perceptions because they reinterpret the meaning of the observed emotional expression.

We expect emotion reframing to be effective because the interpretation of emotional expressions (a) is context-dependent and (b) relies on observers' inferences about expressers' invisible emotional states. Although there are unique facial expressions for certain emotions, other emotional states do not have unique expressions (e.g., disappointment and sadness share an expression; Ekman, 1993). Further, the same expression may convey one of several dramatically different emotions, depending on the context or assumptions of the perceiver (Aviezer et al., 2008; Barrett, Mesquita, Gendron, 2011; Carroll & Russell, 1996). For example, the majority of participants believed a disgusted facial expression was anger when the context suggested anger, and pride when the context suggested pride (Aviezer et al., 2008). In addition, even if the emotional state of an expresser seems clear and unambiguous based on their emotional expression, the underlying cause of that emotional state is generally unclear to observers. Because individuals' emotions are subjective experiences that arise in response to their particular subjective appraisals and interpretations (e.g., Frijda, 1988), it is impossible for observers to be certain of the cause of others' emotional expressions. Because observers cannot be certain of the true cause of expressers' emotions, they are likely to be influenced by how the cause of an emotional expression is framed.

We suspect that emotional expressions can be reframed by the expresser, by another observer, or by the observer him- or herself. Importantly, emotion reframing by the expresser does not require internal reappraisal. For example, a man whose voice cracks and hands shake during a presentation may appraise his own emotional state as "anxious" privately, but may still alter observers'

---

[1] Recruited on Amazon's Mechanical Turk (57 women, M_{age} = 31.46).