Curmudgeon personality: Seeing the positives and just not liking them

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ABSTRACT

Curmudgeon personality is characterized by critical evaluation tendencies wherein both negative- and positive-normed stimuli are viewed negatively (negative dispositional attitudes). Curmudgeons are theorized to attune to emotional qualities of stimuli in general but give greater weight to negative aspects in stimulus valuation, a byproduct of their avoidance temperament. As predicted, curmudgeons freely formed high rates of both positive- and negative-emotion words (emotion-quality bias) in a word-fragment-completion task (Rusting & Larsen, 1998). This was independent of trait negative affect, which was associated with high rates of negative-emotion words only (negative-quality bias). Furthermore, the relationship between curmudgeon personality and emotion-word formation was mediated by behavioral inhibition sensitivity. Curmudgeons "see" positive- and negative-emotion qualities, and evidently in same attitude object, but they weight qualities to avoid higher than qualities to approach.

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1. Introduction

In A Christmas Carol, Charles Dickens presents Ebenezer Scrooge as a curmudgeon who despises, of all things, the beloved traditions of the English Christmas holiday (e.g., charity, goodwill). Scrooge is not incapable of seeing the positive qualities of the season. To the contrary, he sees them clearly and despises them intensely. Bah humbug, indeed. Researchers typically focus on individuals biased toward positive or negative stimulus qualities (e.g., Elliot, 2008), but the present study examines individuals who attune broadly to both positive- and negative-stimulus qualities; namely, everyday Scrooges who react negatively to even positive-normed stimuli.

1.1. Curmudgeon personality: negative dispositional attitudes

The present research builds on Hepler and Albarracin's (2013) work on attitude styles, which utilize the dispositional attitudes measure (DAM). In DAM research, individuals with negative dispositional attitudes report disliking both negative- and positive-normed stimuli (e.g., taxes and camping), referred to here as curmudgeon personality.[1] By contrast, individuals with positive dispositional attitudes report

liking both positive- and negative-normed stimuli. In other words, curmudgeons see the "bad" in attitude objects (e.g., people, places, and things) whereas those on the opposite end of the spectrum see the "good" in those same objects. Curmudgeons are theorized to be critical but not cynical, demonstrating an emotion-based processing breadth (emotion-quality bias) instead of a restricted focus on negative qualities (negative-quality bias). Curmudgeons do not fail to see the positives, but do place greater weight on negative qualities in shaping their attitudes.

1.2. Attitudes and valuation

Attitudes often are described as "hot" affective processes because they reflect feelings about an attitude object based on evaluative properties of valence and strength (i.e., how positively/negatively one feels about a stimulus; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993, 2007; LaPiere, 1934; Osgood, 1969). Specifically, these are accessible attitudes that are automatic and circumvent the "cold" calculations from which attitudes are formed. First, attitudes usually take shape through a process of valence weighting wherein favorable (positive) aspects of an attitude object are weighed against its unfavorable (negative) aspects (Fazio, Pietri, Rocklage, & Shook, 2015). Individuals with negative dispositional attitudes place greater emphasis on negative qualities than others, an apparent extension of their avoidance temperament (Rocklage & Fazio, 2014). In other words, curmudgeons' attitudes are influenced more by repulsive (avoidable) than attractive (approachable) qualities

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[1] Alternatively, Hepler (2015) refers to individuals with negative (positive) dispositional attitudes as "haters" ("likers").

(e.g., Corr & McNaughton, 2012). For instance, camping (DAM item) has attractive qualities (e.g., serenity, closeness to nature, and time with close others) and unattractive qualities (e.g., heat, rocky beds, and ticks). Not blind to its positive features, curmudgeons focus on the rocks and ticks, which limit the appeal of camping. As a result, camping does not *feel* particularly enjoyable (negative accessible attitude) so the prospect of vacation camping is rejected quickly and easily.

1.3. Emotion-quality biases

Researchers typically study sensitivity to positive- *or* negative-stimulus content wherein cognitive-affective responses are processed in a valence-congruent manner based on motivational drives (Bower & Forgas, 2000; Carver, 2006; Elliot, 2008). In valence-congruent processing, emotional qualities of stimuli stand out because emotional people, at state or trait levels, respond directly to stimulus valence. Positive concepts *feel* "good" (e.g., puppies) and negative concepts *feel* "bad" (e.g., cancer; Niedenthal, Halberstadt, & Innes-Ker, 1999). Furthermore, individuals with an *approach temperament* are sensitive to "good" qualities (e.g., potential rewards) whereas those with an *avoidance temperament* are sensitive to "bad" qualities (e.g., potential threats); cf. Elliot and Thrash (2002). Consequently, cognitive-affective biases orient people toward environmental aspects that paint their perspective in a positive or negative light.

Despite the focus on valence-congruent processing in research, models of personality typically treat approach (or extraversion) and avoidance (or neuroticism) as independent factors that operate dynamically (Corr & McNaughton, 2012; Eysenck, 1967; Gray & McNaughton, 2000; Smillie, Pickering, & Jackson, 2006). Namely, in Gray's final installment of reinforcement sensitivity theory, and its subsequent revisions (e.g., Corr & McNaughton, 2012), approach–avoidance motives operate in gradients, as in approach–avoidance conflict (Miller, 1944). In these models, the behavioral inhibition system (BIS) directs reactions to goal conflict by motivating passive avoidance (e.g., defensive or cautious approach) or active avoidance (fight/flight/freeze/fear). Curmudgeons are theorized to be prone to passive avoidance. They focus on unpleasant aspects of attitude objects (e.g., soccer, statistics) that are not overtly threatening and therefore are tolerable when paired with adequate incentives. For instance, negative attitudes toward statistics does not preclude enrollment in a statistics course when the desire to attain a psychology degree is comparatively stronger. In this way, avoidance-oriented curmudgeons activate the behavioral approach system (BAS) when auxiliary rewards are highly attractive, tolerating unpleasantness when necessary without requiring any adjustment to their existing negative attitudes.

Curmudgeons report disliking positive-normed stimuli (e.g., dogs, concerts) and, thus, show valence-incongruent reactions (cf. Hepler, 2015). They do not appear unaffected by, or blind to, positive stimuli, but rather find dislikeable qualities in those stimuli. Curmudgeons seem to integrate negative aspects with positive aspects that more positive individuals fail to consider, which is theorized to extend from tendencies to attend to and categorize emotional qualities broadly (e.g., Ditzfeld & Showers, 2011, 2013; Niedenthal et al., 1999).

To be clear, negative dispositional attitudes are associated with avoidance temperament, but curmudgeons are not highly emotional per se. Hepler and Albarracin (2013) report that negative dispositional attitudes are associated with affect-laden personality variables (e.g., neuroticism and introversion), but only at low-to-moderate levels ($rs \leq .35$), and these relationships cannot account for correlations between dispositional attitudes and other attitude measures (see also, Eschleman, Bowling, & Judge, 2015). As construed, curmudgeons weight negative aspects highly because they account for unattractive qualities to avoid, not because chronic negative affect lures attention to negative qualities at the expense of missing the positives.

1.4. "Seeing" emotional qualities

The current research examines emotion-quality bias by assessing tendencies to "see" (or find) emotion words in potentially ambiguous word stimuli. Rusting and Larsen's (1998) word-fragment completion (WFC) task contains word fragments that are completed by forming either an emotion word (positive or negative) or a neutral word. These authors showed valence-congruent biases based on personality factors. Namely, neuroticism was associated with generating negative (but not positive) emotion words, and extraversion was associated with generating positive (but not negative) emotion words, irrespective of mood. These findings were replicated in Gomez, Gomez, and Cooper (2002) and similar valence-congruent effects are demonstrated elsewhere (e.g., trait anxiety, need for structure; Cavazos, Judice-Campbell, & Ditzfeld, 2012; Gomez & Gomez, 2002). Of main interest here, however, is the tendency to form both positive and negative words at relatively high rates (emotion-quality bias).

Cavazos et al. (2012; $N = 456$) report that the generation of negative-emotion words is positively correlated with the generation of positive-emotion words in the WFC task ($r = .33$), as well as positively associated with other measures of positive/negative emotion-quality processing (story-completion and free-recall tasks). Thus, an emotion-quality bias was previously demonstrated, but has not yet been examined using an individual-differences approach. Curmudgeons are of particular interest because the DAM captures dynamic attitude processes (e.g., valence weighting) that go beyond basic emotional tendencies (e.g., trait anxiety, dysphoria).

1.5. Overview and predictions

Curmudgeons are theorized to attune to emotional qualities (negative *and* positive) in stimuli, even though they evaluate attitude objects critically, principally based on negative qualities. These tendencies are proposed to extend, at least in part, from curmudgeons' passive avoidance. Consequently, curmudgeon personality was predicted to be positively associated with BIS and, to a lesser degree, BAS reward responsiveness. In addition, curmudgeons were hypothesized to freely form both negative- and positive-emotion words in a WFC task (emotion-quality bias), independent of trait negative affect, and as a function of their avoidance temperament; that is, BIS level was predicted to mediate statistically the relationship between curmudgeon personality and emotion-words formed.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

A sample of 140 students ($M_{age} = 25.91$; 72% female) voluntarily completed an online study packet in return for course credit. The ethnic composition was 65% White, 13% Black, 7% Hispanic, 6% Asian, and 7% other. In general, the student population at the sampled institution is slightly older and more ethnically diverse than other universities in the region (Midwest United States).

2.2. Task and measures

2.2.1. Word fragment completion (WFC; Rusting & Larsen, 1998)

In the WFC task, participants fill in letters to create either an emotion word or neutral word in 32 ambiguous word fragments. Half of the word fragments form a positive or neutral word (e.g., C H E _ _; cheer or chess) and the other half form a negative or neutral word (e.g., G L O _ _ Y; gloomy or glossy). Participants freely generate the words that completed the fragments by typing their responses into a text box. Scoring is discussed below.