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Life seems different with you around: Differential shifts in cognitive appraisal in the mere presence of others for neuroticism and impression management

Liad Uziel *

Bar-Ilan University, Israel

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ABSTRACT

How does mere social presence affect cognitive processes? The extant literature has focused on the impact of social presence on cognitive resources. The present study extends this work by focusing on the positivity of cognitive appraisal. Building on recent findings it was predicted that the traits neuroticism and impression management will differentially moderate the effect, such that neuroticism will be associated with a negative shift in appraisal, and impression management with a positive shift. In an experiment, participants ($N = 158$) formed evaluations of life events either alone or in social presence. The results supported the predictions. The findings advance the knowledge about the effect of social presence on cognition, and about the role of personality in moderating responses in public social contexts.

1. Introduction

The impact of mere social presence on behavior (i.e., the *social facilitation effect*) has captured the interest of social psychologists since the establishment of the field as an experimental discipline (Triplett, 1898). Early studies were quick to note that mere social presence could bring about substantial behavioral changes. Interest was focused on the effect of social presence on task performance, with findings showing that social presence causes performance improvements as well as impairments (e.g., Allport, 1924).

Theoretical accounts of performance changes in social presence were initially guided by behavioristic models (e.g., increase in commission of dominant responses; Zajonc, 1965). Later theories (including contemporary models) attributed more weight to attentional and cognitive changes that take place in social presence (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 1981; Huguet, Galvaing, Monteil, & Dumas, 1999). For example, the distraction-conflict theory (Baron, 1986) suggested that social presence distracts one from attending the task at hand and consumes critical cognitive resources, thus facilitating simple performance but impairing complex performance. Central in these models is an emphasis on cognitive *resources* (and their impact on task performance).

To date, little attention has been directed at exploring differences in the nature of appraisals (i.e., evaluations) taking place in the transition from a private to a public social context. That is, we know very little about *what* changes in people's judgments when they are in a public context, even though such changes are (arguably) as influential in affecting behavior as the sheer availability of cognitive resources. Still, this should not come as a surprise considering that mere social presence is an important, yet ambiguous, situation (Blascovich, Mendes, Hunter, & Salomon, 1999; Uziel, 2007). That is, mere social presence carries different meaning among different individuals, yielding what seems to be weak or highly variable response when considered at the group level (Bond & Titus, 1983). However, when individual differences are considered, orderly responses to social presence often arise (Uziel, 2007).

Two personality traits that were found to have a significant role in moderating response to social presence are neuroticism and impression management (IM; Uziel, 2010; Uziel & Baumeister, 2012). Both traits are associated with a strong motivation to gain social acceptance and with high sensitivity to variations in social contexts (Leary, Kelly, Cottrell, & Schreindorfer, 2013; Paulhus, 1984). That is, high scorers on both traits are highly responsive in the transition to a public social context. However, the traits differ with regard to the availability of mental resources that are

* Address: Psychology Department, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan 52900, Israel. Tel.: +972 3 5318581.
E-mail address: liaduziel@gmail.com

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required to successfully adapt to public social contexts (Vohs, Baumeister, & Ciarocco, 2005). Whereas neuroticism is associated with a shortage of self-control resources, IM is associated with sufficient resources (Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004; Uziel, 2014; Uziel & Baumeister, 2012).

Equipped with a different set of self-control resources, neuroticism and IM predispose individuals to react to public social contexts in contrasting ways. This assertion has been supported in recent studies, which have documented differential effect for public social settings on performance in tasks that require self-control resources (e.g., persistence) and creative performance (Uziel, 2010; Uziel & Baumeister, 2012). Specifically, it has been found that for neurotic individuals, even a relatively short duration in a public social setting is sufficient to deplete self-control resources and impair performance. That is, neurotic individuals are highly motivated in public social contexts, but their self-regulatory resources are insufficient to maintain an adequate level of performance.

There are reasons to expect that the negative impact of public social context on neurotics' performance will expand to cognitive appraisal processes. For example, self-control theory (Carver & Scheier, 1981) suggests that a sense of not meeting desired standards is associated with a more pessimist outlook. Moreover, recent findings have revealed a direct link between the availability of self-regulatory resources and an inclination to hold a positive view of life (e.g., Fischer, Greitemeyer, & Frey, 2007; Solberg Nes, Carlson, Crofford, de Leeuw, & Segerstrom, 2011). Neurotics' lack of sufficient self-control resources in public settings could therefore bring them to construe reality in a more negativistic way. In addition, past research has shown that neuroticism is associated with a negative associative network (Uziel, 2006). Negativity could therefore constitute a dominant response among neurotics, and this tendency is expected to strengthen in the public setting (Zajonc, 1965).

In contrast, for IM, research has found that high scorers experience a restoration of self-control resources in public social contexts (Uziel & Baumeister, 2012). Moreover, individuals high in IM have displayed a positive shift in the valence of their spontaneous reactions in public contexts (Uziel, 2010). Considering the availability of self-control resources among high IM individuals in public contexts, it is reasonable to predict that a positive shift will also show in their conscious appraisal of stimuli. That is, stimuli (e.g., external events) will appear more positive and rewarding to them (e.g., Fischer et al., 2007).

The extent to which social presence affects cognitive appraisal has not been studied before. In order to explore whether social presence carries a systematic effect on appraisal processes, we have asked participants to assign their objective evaluations of everyday events from diverse life domains (cf. Uziel, 2006). If the predictions hold true, the findings will imply that mere social presence carries a substantial impact on people's responses beyond its known impact on task performance and on cognitive resources. That is, cognitive appraisal of external reality might also be subjected to change by a fairly minor shift in social context.

We have also explored if differences in appraisal are related to affective responses. However, based on previous findings we did not expect shifts in self-reported affect across social contexts (Uziel, 2010; Uziel & Baumeister, 2012).

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

Participants (N = 158, 86 females, M_{age} = 24.29, SD = 2.96) were psychology students. They arrived at the lab individually for an experiment on personality and cognitive processes. Upon arriving, all participants signed a consent form and completed personality questionnaires measuring *neuroticism* and *IM*. Next, all participants were randomly assigned to a *private* or a *public* social context. For the public social context group (N = 79) an observer entered the room and sat behind the participant, who was told that the observer will be in the room in the coming minutes. In the private social context group (N = 79), participants remained alone in the room. All participants were then asked to complete an affect questionnaire, followed by the *cognitive appraisal* task (Events Evaluation Questionnaire; EEQ). Participants proceeded to complete a demographic questionnaire before being debriefed, compensated, and dismissed.

2.2. Tools

2.2.1. Personality

The EPQ-R short scale (Eysenck, Eysenck, & Barrett, 1985) was used to measure *neuroticism* (e.g., "Does your mood often go up and down?"; α = .86) and IM (using the Lie scale, e.g., "Do you always practice what you preach?"; α = .72). Participants marked their level of agreement with each sentence (1 = *strongly disagree*; 2 = *disagree*; 3 = *agree*; 4 = *strongly agree*). The Likert-type format was preferred over a dichotomous format, because of its improved psychometric properties and successful application in previous studies (e.g., Uziel, 2010).

2.2.2. Affect

Momentary affect was measured with the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988), which consists of 20 items depicting positive feelings (e.g., "enthusiastic"; α = .84) and negative feelings (e.g., "distressed"; α = .89). Participants described their state "right now" on a 1 (*very slightly or not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*) scale.

2.2.3. Cognitive appraisal

Participants completed the *Events Evaluation Questionnaire* (EEQ), as a measure of cognitive appraisal of everyday events (Uziel, 2006). The EEQ is comprised of 18 short descriptions (reflecting the less extreme items from the 30 descriptions that appeared in Uziel, 2006) of everyday positive (e.g., "attending an interesting talk"), neutral (e.g., "receiving a letter from an unknown person"), and negative (e.g., "causing a light car accident") events representing myriad life domains (i.e., academic, financial, occupational, social). All events were phrased as general occurrences with no reference to the participant's personal experiences. That is, the participants were asked to evaluate the events (not to estimate their personal emotional reaction to them) so as to emphasize an analytic approach to the task. The participants were asked to evaluate each event on two separate scales: *positivity* and *negativity*, each ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*). Both scales showed good reliabilities (α = .76 for the positivity scale, and α = .72 for the negativity scale). To gain participants' *Overall Evaluation* of events, negative scores were deducted from positive scores for each event and then averaged across events. Table 1 presents the items of the EEQ.

3. Results

Descriptive statistics across conditions (Table 2) show that neuroticism had a positive correlation with negative affect but not with positive affect. In addition, neuroticism had a negative correlation with the overall evaluation of events. For IM, no significant correlations were found with either affect or cognitive appraisal variables across conditions. Lastly, positive and negative affect were not correlated with event evaluation ratings.