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Report

Sad-and-social is not smart: The moderating effects of social anticipation on mood and information processing

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ABSTRACT

We examined if anticipating working collectively, rather than individually, moderates the effects of mood on information processing through (a) distraction, (b) loafing, and/or (c) task engagement. When participants anticipated working collectively, rather than individually, those in sad moods became distracted by the social elements of the task, resulting in a reduced information focus. In contrast, those in happy moods became engaged in the collective task, increasing their intended effort, raising their information focus, and improving their performance on the task. Social loafing effects did not occur. Mediation analyses revealed that these effects were due to changes in information focus, not social focus or intended effort.

Introduction

Research indicates that sad moods, more than happy moods, promote a systematic processing style that helps people make quality decisions on detail-oriented tasks (see Forgas, 2006; Martin & Clore, 2001). But this research typically examines situations in which people think that they will be making a decision *individually*. In reality, people often process information in anticipation of making a decision *collectively* (Hinsz, Tindale, & Vollrath, 1997). For example, a member of a hiring committee might peruse application materials prior to a committee meeting, but she does so anticipating that the hiring decision will be made collectively, not individually. Likewise, a juror individually processes the evidence in a trial, but he does so knowing that the defendant's fate rests with the jury's decision, not his own decision. In this paper, we examine if anticipating a collective decision moderates the effects of mood on information processing by leading to (a) distraction, (b) loafing, and/or (c) engagement. First, however, we discuss why moods alter information processing.

When working on certain tasks, clear criteria often do not exist for how to proceed. When these criteria are absent, individuals may rely on their moods as information (Schwarz & Clore, 1983). Happy moods indicate that all is well and promote a sense of confidence, while sad moods indicate that the situation is problematic and promote a sense of doubt (Bless, 2001; Clore, Gasper, & Garvin, 2001; Fiedler, 2001; Fredrickson, 1998, 2001; Schwarz, 1990). When all is well, there is little need to pay attention to the details (Vallacher & Wegner, 1989). Thus, happy moods result in a focus on accessible, generalized knowledge, such as heuristics (Bless, 2001; Melton, 1995; Ruder & Bless, 2003), stereotypes (Bodenhausen, Kramer, & Süsser, 1994), scripts (Bless et al., 1996), and schemas (Gasper & Clore, 2002). When a problem exists, however, there is a need to pay attention to the details in order to solve the problem (Vallacher & Wegner, 1989). Thus, sad moods result in a focus on details (Bless et al., 1996; Gasper, 2004; Gasper & Clore, 2002) and a systematic processing style (Bless, Mackie, & Schwarz, 1992; Sinclair, Mark, & Clore, 1994).

This work, however, does not consider what happens when individuals anticipate working collectively. Collective tasks differ from individual tasks in that they include a social element (Fisher & Ellis, 1990). The manner in which people approach these social elements could affect performance (Uziel, 2006). If people become too focused on the social elements of the task, then this increased focus could *detract* attention away from the key information in the task (Hinsz et al., 1997), resulting in poor performance (Cottrell, 1968). Conversely, adding a social element may result in people not feeling accountable for their actions, creating social *loafing* effects and poor performance (Latané, Williams, & Harkins, 1979; Karau & Williams, 1993). Finally, adding a social element may *engage* people in the task by encouraging them to increase their

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effort and information focus, resulting in enhanced performance. In these next sections, we consider how happy and sad moods might influence distraction, loafing, and/or engagement.

Distraction

If people become too focused on the social elements of a collective task, then this focus could distract them from focusing on the informational elements within the task (Hinsz et al., 1997) and hurt performance (Cottrell, 1968). Sad moods may encourage this social focus more than happy moods. Indeed, individuals who suffer from moderate levels of depression are very focused on and concerned about social interactions, devoting extensive effort to prepare for them (Weary & Edwards, 1994). This increased social focus may then decrease the extent to which individuals can focus on processing the information in the task. Indeed, research finds that individuals in sad moods can become too narrowly focused on one aspect of a task, resulting in them being less able to simultaneously focus on other aspects of that task (Bless et al., 1996). Thus, one could propose a *Distraction Hypothesis:* Anticipating a collective decision will result in individuals in sad moods increasing their focus on the social elements of the task, which will distract them from the informational elements of the task, potentially hurting performance.

Loafing

Anticipating a collective decision could also reduce information-processing efforts on a task due to social loafing (Henningsen, Cruz, & Miller, 2000). Indeed, rather than increasing one's focus on the social elements of a task, adding a collective element to a task might actually result in people feeling less accountable for their actions and promote social loafing (Latané et al., 1979; Karau & Williams, 1993). Recall that happy moods indicate that a situation is fine, while sad moods indicate that a situation is problematic. Thus, happy moods may signal that it is appropriate to exert only as much effort on a task as the situation demands; whereas sad moods may signal that there is a problem and the task demands effort (Gendolla, Abele, & Krüsken, 2001; Gendolla & Krüsken, 2002). Thus, in situations where accountability is diminished, such as when one anticipates working collectively, individuals in happy moods may put forth less effort on the task. Indeed, Bodenhausen et al. (1994) found that individuals in happy moods engaged in less effortful information processing under conditions of low, rather than high, accountability. If adding a collective element to a task results in individuals feeling less accountable, then one could propose a *Loafing Hypothesis*: Anticipating a collective decision will result in individuals in happy moods decreasing their effort on the task, decreasing their focus on the informational elements within the task, and reducing performance on the task.

Engagement

Alternatively, anticipating a collective decision could engage individuals in happy moods to increase their effort and information focus on the task. Research indicates that individuals in happy moods value social interactions, for individuals in happy moods view the outcomes of social interactions more positively than those in sad or neutral moods (Baron, 1990; Carnevale & Isen, 1986; Clark & Watson, 1988; Cunningham, 1988a,1988b; Forgas, 1998; George, 1991; Vittengl & Holt, 1998). According to the collective effort model (Karau & Williams, 1993), people are motivated to exert effort on a collective task when they perceive that their efforts will be instrumental in obtaining valued outcomes. Happy moods, more than sad moods, may result in people feeling as if their efforts will be instrumental in obtaining valued outcomes (Erez & Isen, 2002), which could result in an increased focus on information. Indeed, when individuals in happy moods feel engaged in a task, they have been shown to increase their focus on the information and process that information in a more systematic manner (Isen, 1999, 2000). Additionally, Trope, Igou, and Burke (2006) propose that positive affect attunes people to information that is instrumental when it comes to the pursuit of their goals, which could increase information focus. In support of this view, when it comes to working with others, Bramesfeld and Gasper (2008) found that happy moods, more than sad moods, promoted skills that helped people in happy moods share, discuss, and combine information with others.

Thus, anticipating a collective decision may engage individuals in happy moods to increase their intended effort and focus on the information, because they believe that doing so will be instrumental in obtaining valued outcomes. As such, one could propose an *Engagement Hypothesis:* Anticipating a collective decision will result in individuals in happy moods intending to exert more effort on the task, increasing their focus on the instrumental information, and improving their performance on the task.

Summary of hypotheses

To summarize, collective tasks differ from individual tasks, in that they involve a social element. Research indicates that individuals in sad moods, more so than those in happy moods, may focus on the social elements of a collective task. Thus, for individuals in sad moods, adding a collective element to a task may result in individuals becoming distracted by the social elements of the task, reducing their information focus, and hurting performance (i.e., distraction). In contrast, for individuals in happy moods, adding a collective element to the task may either (a) reduce feelings of accountability, resulting in lower intended effort, less information focus, and poorer performance (i.e., loafing), or (b) engage them by increasing their intended effort, promoting focus on instrumental information, and improving performance on the task (i.e., engagement).

Experimental paradigm

To examine the distraction, loafing, and engagement hypotheses, we needed a decision-making task that could be solved using heuristic/systematic thinking strategies and in which people anticipated working individually or collectively. Stasser and Stewart's (1992) murder mystery task can be completed in anticipation of making a decision individually or collectively. It also seemed perfect for testing systematic/heuristic processing, as people consistently use motive as a heuristic for guilt, even when evidence indicates that a suspect could not commit the crime (Kaplan, 1989). Within the task, the Heuristic Suspect had a strong and obvious motive to commit the murder, the Foil Suspect was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time, and the Correct Suspect is identified only by carefully and systematically processing the evidence.

Murder mystery pilot study

To test the assumption that differing amounts of heuristic/systematic processing resulted in the differential selection of the three suspects under consideration, we conducted a pilot study ($N = 36$). In it, participants read the shortened murder mystery case, chose a guilty suspect, and rated each suspect's guilt on a scale of 0 (*not at all guilty*) to 10 (*very guilty*). Respondents also indicated their focus on the information by rating how much opportunity, apparent motive (reverse scored), the evidence, and the discrepancies in the sus-