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Reports

On being happy and gullible: Mood effects on skepticism and the detection of deception[☆]Joseph P. Forgas^{*}, Rebekah East

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ABSTRACT

Are we more likely to believe or disbelieve another person depending on our mood state? Based on past research on interpersonal communication and recent work on affect and social cognition, we predicted and found that negative mood increased and positive mood decreased people's skepticism and their ability to detect deception, consistent with the more externally focused, accommodative processing style promoted by negative affect. After a mood induction using positive, neutral or negative films, participants viewed deceptive or truthful interviews with individuals who denied committing a theft. Judgments of the targets' guilt and their truthfulness were collected. As predicted, negative mood increased judges' skepticism towards the targets, and improved their accuracy in detecting deceptive communications, while judges in a positive mood were more trusting and gullible. The relevance of these findings for everyday judgments of trust and the detection of deception are considered, and their implications for recent affect-cognition theories are discussed.

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Introduction

Does temporary mood influence people's tendency to believe or disbelieve others, and their accuracy in detecting deception? More generally, does affect influence the level of gullibility or skepticism we manifest towards others? One of the most difficult and demanding tasks in everyday social life is to decide whether a person is truthful or deceptive (Jones, 1964). In a sense, interpersonal trust lies at the very heart of effective social interaction and successful personal relationships. Monitoring the veracity of the interpersonal messages we receive is a demanding task (Bond & DePaulo, 2006; Kraut, 1980), requiring the use of elaborate and highly constructive cognitive processes. Too much faith in the truthfulness of others can be just as problematic as too much skepticism. Knowing when to believe or disbelieve a person is also of critical importance in forensic, judicial and investigative domains.

Detecting deception

A number of personality and situational variables can influence how people make decisions about trust. Surprisingly, we know little about how short-term moods may influence people's tendency to believe or disbelieve others, and their ability to detect deception

(cf. Lane & DePaulo, 1999). This is all the more surprising, given that credibility decisions are most often made in affect-rich contexts. For example, deciding whether or not to believe a romantic partner, a friend, a child or an employee are usually tasks loaded with affective significance. This paper seeks to extend recent work on affect and social cognition to the domain of veracity judgments, by demonstrating for the first time that temporary good or bad moods can have a systematic and predictable influence on skepticism and the ability to detect deception.

We know from past research that there are a number of reasons why people are overly trusting when assessing veracity, and are rather poor at detecting deception (Bond & DePaulo, 2006; Ekman & O'Sullivan, 1991; Levine, Park, & McCornack, 1999). Untrained people often hold naïve theories about cues to deception and thus often focus on the wrong behaviors when trying to distinguish truths from lies, such as the infrequency or unexpectedness of a described event (Fiedler, 1989), or the falsifiability of statements (Fiedler & Walka, 1993). Veracity judgments are also distorted by common errors, such as the "truth bias". This tendency to assume that others are truthful may prevent people from actively searching for cues to deception and so reduces detection accuracy (McCornack & Parks, 1986). Mood may well be one influence on the truth bias, as people in a negative mood are significantly less likely to form positive, lenient and optimistic inferences in ambiguous situations (Forgas, 1995, 2002; Forgas, Bower, & Krantz, 1984), one issue we will explore here.

Another source of gullibility and the poor ability to detect deception is the 'correspondence bias', the common tendency to

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assume that observed behaviors correspond to genuine internal dispositions (O'Sullivan, 2003). Several experiments suggest that positive mood increases and negative mood decreases the correspondence bias (Forgas, 1998), and by implication, the tendency to accept communications as genuine. Extrapolating from recent research on affect and social cognition, we may expect that positive mood should increase, and negative mood decrease both the truth bias, and the correspondence bias. Thus, negative mood should increase skepticism, as dysphoric individuals form less positive and optimistic inferences (Forgas, 1995, 2002; Forgas et al., 1984), and should be less influenced by the truth bias and the correspondence bias (Forgas, 1998). The psychological mechanisms underlying these mood effects will be considered next.

Mood effects on interpersonal trust

Affective experiences penetrate every aspect of our lives, and play an important role in influencing many of our cognitive and behavioral strategies (Fiedler, 2001; Forgas, 2002). Extensive research in recent years showed that affective states often have a strong affect-congruent influence on thinking, memory and judgments, and also influence the kinds of information processing strategies people adopt in social situations (Bless, 2001; Bless & Fiedler, 2006; Fiedler, 2001; Forgas, 2002). Surprisingly, the role of affective states on interpersonal trust and the detection of deception have received little attention. This is particularly interesting, given strong recent evidence that mood states play an important role in how people process social information and how they make sense of observed social behaviors in particular (Fiedler, 2001; Forgas, 1994, 2002; Sedikides, 1995).

Our interest here is in mild mood states rather than emotions, as subconscious moods have been found to have more uniform, enduring and reliable cognitive and behavioral consequences than is the case with highly context-specific emotions (Forgas, 2006). For our purposes, we may define moods as low-intensity, diffuse and relatively enduring affective states without a salient antecedent cause and therefore little cognitive content, whereas emotions are more intense, short-lived and usually have a definite cause and clear cognitive content (Forgas, 1995, 2002). Recent affect-cognition theories suggest that there are two cognitive mechanisms that are responsible for mood effects on judgments: (1) *informational effects* (influencing the content and valence of cognition), and (2) *processing effects* (influencing the process of cognition).

Informational effects

Moods may influence veracity judgments by selectively priming information that is associatively linked to the current mood state within a network of memory representations (Bower, 1981; Forgas, 1995). Thus positive mood should prime a more positive, trusting evaluation of a message, and negative mood should prime greater skepticism and rejection. Consistent with the affect-priming model, numerous studies found a mood-congruent bias in the way people form a variety of social judgments (Bless & Fiedler, 2006; Fiedler, 2001; Forgas, 1994, 1995; Forgas et al., 1984; Niedenthal, Halberstadt, Margolin, & Innes-Ker, 2000). Recent integrative theories of affect and cognition such as the Affect Infusion Model (AIM; Forgas, 1995, 2002) specifically predict that such affect congruence should be greatest when a more elaborate, constructive processing strategy is required to perform a task, as would be the case with most veracity and truthfulness judgments (Fiedler, 2001; Forgas, 1995; Sedikides, 1995). Because veracity judgments typically require judges to go beyond the information given (Bond & DePaulo, 2006; Kraut, 1980; O'Sullivan, 2003), we expected a mood-congruent influence on the degree of trust people manifest when judging potentially deceptive communications. In particular, negative mood, by selectively priming negative information, should make

judges more skeptical and suspicious, resulting in a stricter criterion for accepting all communications as truthful.

Processing effects of mood

In addition to the mood-congruent informational effects discussed above, moods may also impact the way information is processed (*processing effects*). Several studies showed that people in a negative mood tend to process external information in a more accommodative, detailed and systematic manner while those in a positive mood tend to adopt a more assimilative, heuristic, top-down processing style (Bless, 2001; Fiedler, 2001). Interestingly, this is just this kind of externally focused processing style that should also facilitate the detection of false or deceptive interpersonal communications (Bless & Fiedler, 2006).

Consistent with such a mood-induced processing dichotomy, people in a negative mood use more detailed schemas, produce and process persuasive messages more systematically (Bless, 2001; Forgas, 2007), rely more on new, external information (Fiedler, Fladung, & Hemmeter, 1987), and have better memory for such details (Fiedler, Lachnit, Fay, & Krug, 1992). Negative mood, by promoting a more accommodative processing style also reduces the incidence of some judgmental errors such as the correspondence bias (Forgas, 1998), and improves the accuracy of eyewitness recollections (Forgas, Vargas, & Laham, 2005). Extrapolating from this evidence, we expect here that negative mood should improve judges' accuracy and *sensitivity* to deception by promoting a more careful, accommodative processing style. Furthermore, accommodative processing in negative mood should also reduce such common judgmental errors as the 'truth bias' and the correspondence bias, thus increasing the criterion for the acceptance of doubtful messages.

The present research

Based on the evidence surveyed above, we expected that by priming mood-congruent information, negative moods should produce a more skeptical, doubtful judgmental style and positive mood promote a more gullible stance in veracity judgments (an *informational effect*). Negative affect should also promote a more accommodative and attentive information *processing style* that improves detection *sensitivity* and also reduces positivity biases such as the truth bias and the correspondence bias (a *processing effect*). In signal detection terms, negative affect should thus have a dual influence, both improving *discrimination*, and also increasing the *criterion* for accepting messages as true. The joint effect of these two processes should be increased overall skepticism in negative mood, and the better detection of deception (but not truthfulness) compared to positive mood judges.

Method

Overview, design and participants

Participants reported to the laboratory for what was described as two unrelated studies involving social judgments. The first task (the mood induction) was described as designed to select videos for use in future experiments. As part of this task, participants watched brief 10-min edited video films designed to elicit positive, neutral and negative affective states. Next, participants viewed four video clips of males and females who were either honest or deceptive when denying an alleged theft during a taped interrogation. Participants then made judgments about the target's guilt or innocence, and their truthfulness. The design was thus a three by two mixed design, with mood (happy, neutral, sad) and deception (deceptive, honest) as the independent variables. Participants were 117 students (42 men and 75 women) who received course credit for their participation. Their mean age was 21.15 years.

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