

Sex Differences in Emotional Appropriateness

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Abstract

Men and women have different emotional lives. For example, men express more anger and pride, while women express more happiness, fear, and love (Plant, Hyde, Keltner, & Devine, 2000). The purpose of this study was to determine if men and women are equally likely to express *appropriate* emotional responses. Emotional appropriateness is emotional behavior that conforms to the norms of the social context. For example, if someone insults you, it is appropriate to feel anger but inappropriate to feel happiness. A total of 505 undergraduate students completed this study in return for course credit. They completed the Levels of Emotional Awareness Scale (LEAS; Lane, Quinlan, Schwartz, Walker, & Zeitlin, 1990), which asks participants to describe how they would feel in 20 emotionally evocative situations. In this study, we used the responses to the first item. Usually, the LEAS is scored based upon emotional awareness. We developed a new method to score responses based upon emotional appropriateness. Then we used a chi-square test of independence to compare the proportion of women and men who gave appropriate responses to item 1. Both women and men were likely to provide appropriate emotional responses (78% of women and 84% of men), but these proportions were not significantly different. These results provide evidence against the stereotypes that women do not express their emotions appropriately, and that men do not express their emotions much at all. Future research should examine sex differences on the remaining LEAS items. Different LEAS items were designed to elicit different emotional responses. Although there were no significant sex differences in the appropriateness of emotional responses to Item 1, there might be differences in items that were designed to tap other emotions.

Introduction

What constitutes an appropriate emotional response? Emotionally appropriate behavior is behavior that is appropriate to the social context. For example, when someone insults you, it is appropriate to be angry or defensive, but it is not appropriate to feel happy. In addition to feeling the wrong emotion, it is possible to feel the wrong amount of some emotion (Shields, 2005). For example, in some situations, happiness is appropriate, but a person can express too much happiness or too little. Hutson-Comeaux and Kelly (2002) showed that when actors over-reacted emotionally, their reactions were judged as inappropriate.

Sex stereotypes suggest there are differences between men and women in terms of their emotion appropriateness. Sex stereotypes are a set of beliefs about the personal attributes of women and men (Ashmore & del Boca, 1979). These include societal beliefs regarding expressions of emotion and the appropriateness of expressing emotions. For example, men are believed to express more anger and pride and women are believed to express more happiness, fear, love, sadness, and sympathy (Plant et al., 2000).

Sex stereotypes regarding the expression of emotion are not always accurate. For example, men over-react to anger and women under-reacting to anger (Kelly & Hutson-Comeaux, 1999), and men are expected to display more intense anger than women (Grossman & Wood, 1993), but women express more intense anger than men when reliving past emotional events (Chentsova-Dutton & Tsai, 2007), contrary to the stereotypes. Because sex stereotypes are not always accurate, the purpose of this study was to determine empirically if men and women are equally likely to provide emotionally appropriate responses.

Method

Participants

A total of 505 (296 female, 209 male) undergraduate students participated in this study in return for course credit. They ranged in age from 18 to 50 (Mean 19.78, SD 3.17). Participants identified themselves as follows: 57.7% Caucasian, 12.7% Hispanic, 11.5% Asian, 7.7% African American, 6.2% Pacific Islander, and 4.2% other.

Measures

Levels of Emotional Awareness Scale

The Levels of Emotional Awareness Scale (LEAS; Lane et al., 1990) is an open-ended test. Respondents are instructed to read 20 vignettes and answer two questions: "How would you feel?" and "How would the other person feel?" Respondents describe how they would feel in that certain situation as well as how the other person in the situation would feel. The 20 vignettes were intended to evoke one of four emotions: anger, happiness, sadness or fear. For this study, only responses from the first question to Item 1 ("How would you feel?") were analyzed.

The LEAS was originally designed to measure understanding of emotion words. However, in this study, a new scoring method was created to determine whether participants provided appropriate emotional responses to the first item. To do this, we needed to determine what was an appropriate response to item 1. This involved three steps. First, we examined the emotion words and phrases that participants used. To determine whether or not a word was an "emotion word", we used the following definition: an emotion is a state of physical arousal and an interpretation of that physical arousal (Aune, 1997). We calculated the frequency of each emotion word and phrase, and we grouped synonyms together. Second, we supplemented the list of words and phrases that were actually used by the participants in our study with additional synonyms for emotion words. To determine synonyms for emotion words, we used the list of emotions provided by James Russell (personal communication, March 2, 2010). Third, by examining how frequent each emotion category was, we selected some emotion categories as being "appropriate". In other words, if many participants reported a certain emotional response, we defined this as an appropriate emotional response.

Now that we had decided what emotional responses were appropriate responses to item 1, we needed to divide participants into two groups - those who gave an appropriate emotional response and those who did not. We used three steps. First, we formatted the list of emotion words and phrases so that it could be read by Program for Open-Ended Scoring (POES; Leaf & Barchard, 2010). POES is a computerized scoring program that is designed to score open-ended tests like the LEAS. The formatted list is referred to as the *Wordlist*. Second, we asked POES to score the original responses to LEAS item 1, using our new *Wordlist*. POES reported how many times each participant used each word or phrase on the *Wordlist*.

Finally, we transferred the POES output into SPSS so that we could calculate appropriateness. Participants were given a score of 1 if they used one or more appropriate emotion words, and were given a score of 0 if they did not use any appropriate emotion words.

Procedures

Participants completed the LEAS individually online as part of a larger study. The study included two 90-minute testing sessions.

Data Analysis

To determine if men and women differ in terms of the appropriateness of their emotional responses, we calculated the proportion of men and women who gave an appropriate emotional response. We compared these two proportions using a chi-square test of independence.

Results

The percentage of participants that answered appropriately did not differ by sex (Fisher's Exact Test, $p = .139$). Table 1 shows that 78% of women and 84% of men gave appropriate emotional responses.

Table 1

Sex and Emotionally Appropriate Responses

Appropriate Response	Sex	
	Female	Male
Yes	232	175
No	64	34

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine if there is a difference between women and men in terms of the appropriateness of their emotional responses. We found no significant difference in the proportion of men and women who gave appropriate emotional responses. However, in the current study, only Item 1 of the LEAS was scored. The LEAS has 20 items that were designed to elicit four different emotions. If all 20 items were scored, differences between men and women might be found on some items. In particular, sex differences might be found on scenarios that elicit emotions where sex differences are commonly believed to exist: anger, pride, love, fear, and happiness. Many participants stated that they would feel anger in response to Item 1, but others said they would feel embarrassed. The complexities of this particular item may have masked the sex differences. Future research should therefore compare men's and women's emotional appropriateness on all 20 items.

In addition, future research should create separate scoring keys for men and women, because what emotional reaction is considered appropriate seems to depend upon whether someone is male or female. Two studies have demonstrated this. First, Smith, Ulch, Cameron, and Cumberland (1989) found that male participants rated angry females more positively than they rated angry males. Second, Hutson-Comeaux and Kelly (2002) showed that female actors were rated as less appropriate when over-reacting to the emotion of happiness, whereas male actors were rated as less appropriate when over-reacting to the emotion of anger. If the appropriateness of an emotional response is related to sex, researchers should determine why this relationship exists. Is the appropriateness of the response dependent upon the sex of the person expressing the emotion, the content that they are expressing emotion about (children, relationships, work), the context in which they are expressing the emotion (private conversation, business meeting), or all three? If some people have difficulty expressing emotions appropriately, this research would be helpful in guiding them towards appropriate responses.

Finally, it is important to note that most men and women gave an appropriate response. This result provides some evidence against the stereotypes that women do not express their emotions appropriately (Kelly & Hutson-Comeaux, 1999), and that men hide their emotions (Kring & Gordon, 1998). However, future research should conduct a more fine-grained analysis. We found that most men and women used at least one appropriate emotion word when describing their responses to this situation. However, we did not try to quantify whether a person was over-reacting. Future research should determine if men and women express the appropriate amount of their emotions, and whether men and women are equally likely to over-react or under-react.

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