

Mood acknowledgment and correction for the mood-congruency bias in social judgment

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Abstract

Past research has revealed a mood-congruency bias wherein people evaluate other individuals more positively when they are experiencing good moods than when they are experiencing bad moods. At times, however, people may attempt to prevent their transient mood states from biasing their evaluations of other people. It was proposed that the capacity to attend openly to one's moods is an important precursor to such mood correction efforts. Two studies supported this hypothesis. People who were encouraged to attend to their feelings (Study 1), as well as people who are naturally inclined to acknowledge their feelings (Study 2), were more likely than their counterparts to prevent their positive and negative moods from biasing their judgments of a target person.

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Imagine this scenario: Shortly after receiving the news that her pet had died, a professor interviewed a job candidate and made a recommendation regarding his suitability for the job. Considerable research on the mood-congruency effect (e.g., Forgas, 2000, 2001; Schwarz & Clore, 1996) suggests that the sadness prompted by this loss might lead the professor to evaluate the applicant's potential less favorably than she would otherwise. Mood-congruency effects may not be inevitable, however. The professor's acknowledgment of her negative mood might lead her to counteract the potentially biasing effect of her feelings. Our research examined the role that an individual's ability to openly acknowledge his or her moods may play in the mood correction process. Specifically, are people less likely to reveal the mood-congruency bias when they are encouraged to focus on their feelings? Do individual differences in such abilities predict the degree of mood-congruent bias that occurs? Before addressing these questions, we outline previous research on how moods

affect social judgments as well as pertinent recent models of correction processes.

Correction for extraneous irrelevant influences on social judgments

An extensive literature supports the notion that people experiencing positive moods are more likely than those experiencing negative moods to view the world through "rose-colored glasses." Many studies have revealed a "mood-congruency effect" in social judgments wherein people evaluate others more favorably when they are in a good mood than when they are in a bad mood. Research indicates that moods may automatically prime mood-congruent thoughts that are then used in impression formation or they may be used in a heuristic fashion to aid people in estimating how they feel about a person (e.g., Forgas, 1995; Schwarz & Clore, 1996).

Although people's moods may often activate mood-congruent constructs that taint their evaluations of other people, individuals may at times attempt to prevent mood-related bias. This possibility is consistent

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with research indicating that people make efforts to ensure that their judgments are untainted by other potentially biasing factors (e.g., Martin & Achee, 1992; Schwarz & Bless, 1992; Stapel, Martin, & Schwarz, 1998; Wegener & Petty, 1997; Wilson & Brekke, 1994). People are often confronted with situations in which extraneous contextual factors unrelated to a target of judgment might have an effect on the thoughts and feelings that they have in the presence of the target. According to recent theorists (e.g., Wegener & Petty, 1997; Wilson & Brekke, 1994), people are more likely to correct for such factors when they are (a) aware of the potentially biasing influence of a contextual factor (i.e., possess a theory regarding its likely effect), (b) motivated to adjust for the extraneous factor (i.e., are concerned about judgmental accuracy), and (c) capable of engaging in correction (e.g., possess the cognitive or emotional skills necessary for correction, knowledge of strategies, and sufficient cognitive resources).

Although these theorists and others (e.g., Branscombe & Cohen, 1991) have suggested that mood may be a contextual factor that people are motivated to correct for when evaluating other people, there has been relatively little research examining the circumstances that prompt such mood correction. The extant literature indicates that people are more likely to correct for the biasing effect of moods on their judgments of others when they have the ability to process target information efficiently (Ottati & Isbell, 1996) and when they are motivated to think carefully about targets (Isbell & Wyer, 1999). Related work using judgment tasks other than person perception suggests, additionally, that people are more likely to correct for their moods when they are inclined to think extensively about judgments (i.e., DeSteno, Petty, Wegener, & Rucker, 2000) and when they are alerted to potential non-target causes of moods (e.g., Schwarz & Clore, 1996).¹

Mood acknowledgment and correction for mood-related bias

Our research seeks to expand upon this prior work by examining whether mood acknowledgment (i.e., the

capacity to focus on, attend to, or monitor moods; e.g., Salovey, Mayer, Goldman, Turvey, & Palfai, 1995; Swinkels & Giuliano, 1995) may engender mood correction in social judgments. We were led to consider the potential role of mood acknowledgment after examining the literature regarding how moods influence memory (e.g., Bower & Forgas, 2001). Like research on moods and social judgments, research on the mood-memory link has typically revealed mood-congruency (more negative memories among people experiencing more negative moods); however, this effect can be eliminated or reversed when specific needs or motivations are activated. In particular, the motivation to repair negative moods may prompt people to recruit positive memories (e.g., Parrott & Sabini, 1990).

Although this work on mood-incongruent memory has focused on the motivation to repair moods, rather than the motivation to correct for mood-related bias, we believe that it has important implications for understanding mood correction. Mood repair and mood correction can both be conceived of as forms of mood regulation (Tice & Bratslavsky, 2000), and accordingly, may be influenced by similar factors. Recent research by McFarland and Buehler (1997, 1998) revealing that the ability to acknowledge one's feelings is an important determinant of memory-based mood repair seems particularly relevant to understanding mood correction. These authors proposed that mood regulation typically involves a two-stage process in which people first openly acknowledge their feelings and then invoke affect-regulatory strategies. Their results supported this proposal: People who were naturally inclined, or temporarily encouraged, to acknowledge their feelings were more likely than their less attentive counterparts to respond to negative moods by invoking a self-regulatory recall strategy (i.e., recruiting positive autobiographical memories). Based on this work, we propose that mood acknowledgment may also be an important precursor to mood regulation efforts involving mood correction. That is, it is plausible that people who are naturally inclined, or temporarily encouraged, to attend openly to their feelings will be more likely than their counterparts to correct for the biasing influence of their moods. If people are inattentive to feelings, mood correction should be preempted. Two studies were conducted to test this reasoning.

We should note that in a recent chapter appearing after we conducted our studies, Berkowitz, Jaffee, Jo, and Troccoli (2000) proposed similarly that this research examining mood-incongruent recall has implications for understanding mood correction. Like us, they assessed whether mood awareness decreases mood-congruency. Although their research offered some intriguing preliminary support for the role of mood awareness, the findings were not definitive. The results were based primarily on internal analyses and there was no evidence

¹ We use the expression "mood correction" in a broad sense to refer to the processes by which people either prevent or eliminate mood-related bias in their judgments. This usage is consistent with that of several prominent models of mental correction (see Strack, 1992; Wegener & Petty, 1997; Wilson & Brekke, 1994). These theorists have noted that correction for bias may occur at the pre-judgment phase (i.e., people may theorize that moods could bias judgments and engage in "preemptive correction" [e.g., by ignoring their moods; by avoiding biasing stimuli; by neutralizing moods]) or at the post-judgment stage (e.g., people may form a preliminary impression and then adjust it to remove the presumed mood-related bias). Thus, people can "correct for bias" by avoiding bias altogether or by adjusting preliminary judgments.

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